Chrome Shelled Regios Volume5

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These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 5

鋼殻のレギオスV

エモーショナル・ハウル

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鋼殻のレギオスV

エモーショナル・ハウル

思いがけない養父の言葉。リーリンは複雑な思いにとらわれていた。

本当は会いたい。心から。でも、それでレイフォンが喜ぶのだろうか……。

一方、ツェルニではナルキが第十七小隊に残る意志を示す。

対抗試合の最終戦、ツェルニ最強の第一小隊との決戦を前に、ニーナは全メンバーでの合宿を計画した。

合宿最後の夜、レイフォンはナルキ、料理当番として参加したメイシェンに呼び出されるが、足場が突然崩れ落ち――。

レイフォン、そして第十七小隊に最大のピンチが訪れる。それぞれの運命の歯車は音を立てて回り始め……。

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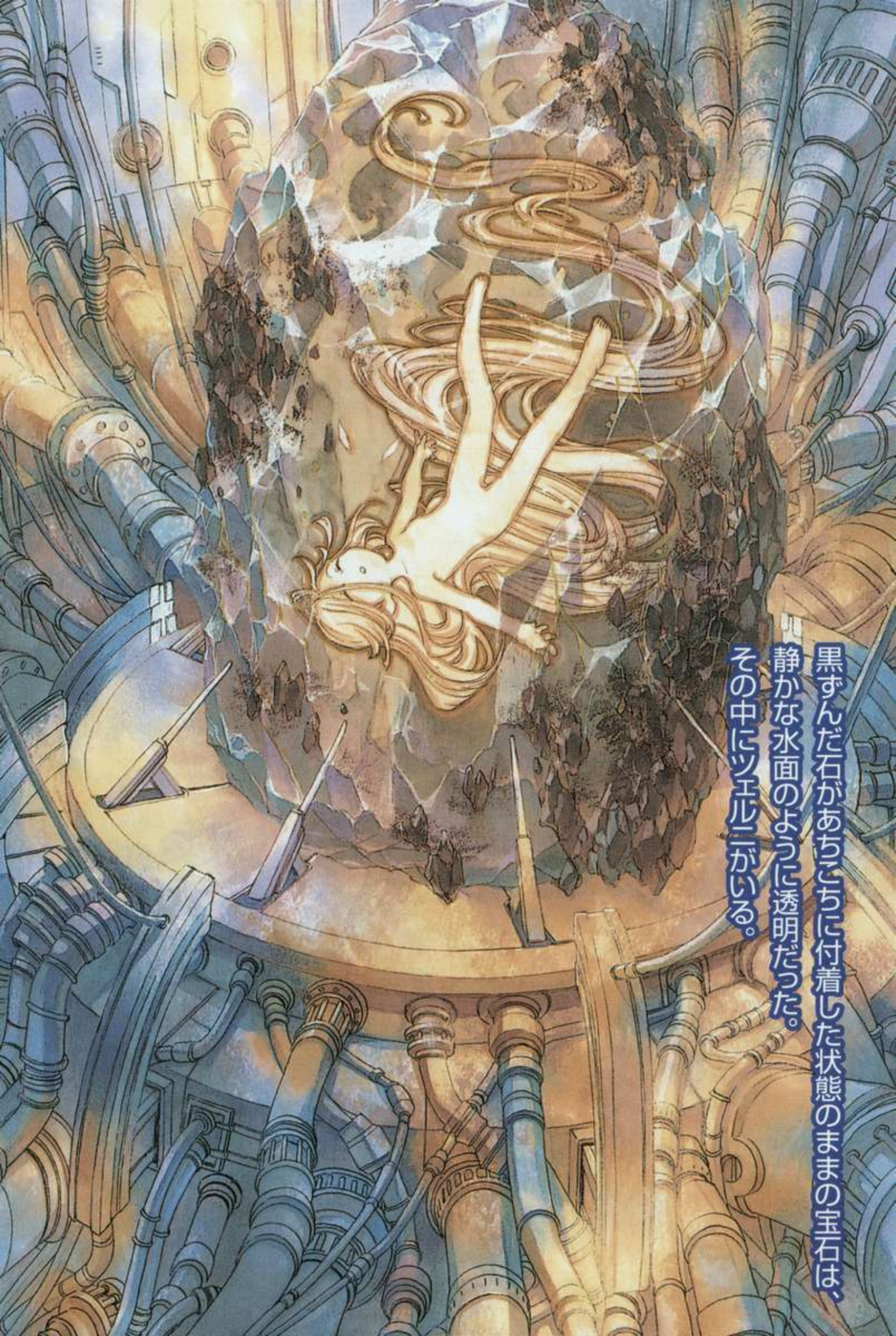
「いや、ここはわたしに任せておけ」
「……離していただけますか」
鋼殻のレギオス V
エモーショナル・ハウル

意識が遠のいていく。

「レイとん！」

メイシェンの悲痛な叫び声に突き飛ばされるように、

レイフォンの意識は暗闇の中に飲まれた。


黒ずんだ石があちこちに付着した状態のままの宝石は、
静かな水面のように透明だった。
その中にツェルニがいる。

Prologue

The sound of the whiteboard markers hitting the whiteboard pulled Leerin back to reality. She was now in the classroom. The teacher was using the marker as he explained the content written on the whiteboard. Flustered, Leerin quickly jotted down the information in her notebook.

Recently, she felt an illusory weight on her back. That weight belonged to that wooden box that her adopted father wanted her to give to Layfon. Within that box was a Dite representing the fact that Derek had taught him every Psyharden technique. This Dite should already be in Layfon's hands, but Derek didn't get to hand it to his apprentice due to the circumstances.

"Mail it or deliver it to him personally. It's all fine."

Derek had said.

It had been a month since he made that request. Leerin had written a letter during that month. A letter about her happily studying, something like that.

(All rubbish.)

The content of the letter involved some truth and also something about hoping for such a future, but Layfon probably wouldn't realize.

(Because he's really slow.)

A light sigh that the teacher and other students in the room would fail to detect escaped from Leerin's lips. She bit the top of her pen. One month had passed without her making any decision. The box was still in her room.

(Mail it? Or go there myself?)

That was how she felt now. But she had to take leave from school if she was to go to Zuellni. From Grendan to Zuellni..... Half a year ago, Layfon took one month to get to Zuellni, but what about now? Both cities were moving. Somebody said that the speed of a roaming bus was slower than normal, which meant it was possible for the journey to take three months. If she went to Zuellni and came back to Grendan, she would have to repeat a year before she could move up one grade. Wasting an entire year would be a problem for Leerin, and she couldn't neglect the extra financial burden of repeating her study.

And also, to use the money Layfon earned from the underground matches...

Derek had said in simple terms that he still wanted to leave the city.

Leerin had noticed the reason behind the change in Layfon. Either way, she had been living with him for a long time. The cause was the shortage of food before Layfon became a Heaven's Blade successor. An unknown disease had spread throughout Grendan's farms, cutting down food production. Every city fed itself. It was impossible to transport food from another city, so a city that couldn't feed itself could only die. Because of that, it was

difficult to respond to such a situation. One could even say it was impossible to respond.

A lot of people died from starvation during the time of the disease. Grendan had implemented a system to apportion food to the population. Military Artists were prioritized as they had the duty to protect the city, creating an imbalance in the distribution of food. As a result, riots had appeared in several areas. Derek had already retired from the front lines, so he wasn't given much food. As for the children at the orphanage? Not enough. Even so, they managed to survive in that half a year. Things had returned to normal when Layfon became the Heaven's Blade successor.

But the price of food increased drastically when the food distribution system was abolished. The events back then did plant something in Layfon's heart. He had received more food than other children, being a Military Artist.

(His personality. He probably couldn't stand it.)

That was why she was so concerned with anything related to him.....

(Aah, I can't decide.)

She knew she wanted to see him. She very much wanted to see him.

(But.....)

To waste a year?

(And I'll be using Layfon's money too.)

But.....

(What will Layfon think if I do this?)

That was the one thing she was really concerned with.

Chapter 1: The path of thinking

Standing beside Layfon, Naruki had said something unbelievable in the training room.

"Let me join the platoon."

Nina looked at Naruki, shocked numb by her request. She was holding a dirty cloth and a Dite. Pretty bubbles adorned the cloth. On the floor beside her were a bucket and another Dite. Liquid effective in preventing slippage churned in the bucket.

Layfon had left the school building after class with Meishen, Mifi and Naruki. When he realized only Naruki was left beside him, he was shocked to find out he had already arrived outside the Training Complex. And then Naruki had urged him to enter the Complex. What came next was her request.

"And what is that for?"

Nina wiped her hand with a clean piece of cloth and stood up to face Naruki. Layfon stepped back to look at the two of them. The 17th platoon had participated in another match after the match with the 10th platoon, but Naruki didn't attend. Naruki hadn't come to the Training Complex after the match with the 10th platoon. It wasn't because she was being arrogant or that she was worried about something, and Layfon and everyone found that fairly normal. She only entered the platoon to investigate the 10th platoon's drug dealing. She had failed to find anything, and later on, the Student President had ordered the City Police to stop the investigation. Even so, Naruki participated in the match against

the 10th platoon to witness the happenings. Everyone, including Naruki herself, thought she had no reason to stay in the platoon anymore. Layfon had thought that she was putting all her effort in the City Police. She was striving hard to become the Chief of Police . He thought that, but.....

"Of course, that's if senpai thinks I can be of use."

"Yeah, I understand that part. But why?"

"Um.....I understand my immaturity....." she mumbled and glanced at Layfon.

"Hmm....."

Nina caught that glance. Layfon knew Naruki and Nina were concerned with his past, but he felt that Naruki wasn't as concerned before participating in the platoon match. He noticed Nina had caught that glance.

"Is that so?.....Well then, how about we try a test?"

"Huh?"

Layfon widened his eyes. He hadn't been listening.

"You did a test too when you first joined. This is about the same. "

"But....."

Nina nodded, noticing what Layfon wanted to say. "Yes, I'm the one who wants her to join. But I also tested you when you joined. I'll hold back somewhat this time too."

Now that Nina had brought back the time when he first joined, Layfon didn't know what expression to make.

"I don't think there's a need to confirm your strength, but there's something else I want to confirm. What do you say?"

"I understand," Naruki nodded with a strange expression.

Looking happy, Nina took out her Dite and restored it.

"....."

With tension on her face, Naruki took out the two Dites from her weapon harness and restored them. They were a baton and a rope. The baton was the same as a police baton, except it didn't have the police symbol. That Dite was made by Harley. Naruki wrapped the rope around her left wrist and using her left hand, took something out of her pocket and tossed it to Layfon. It was the badge of the 17th platoon, meaning she'd accept it if she passed the test.

"How about I give you some time to take some advice from Layfon?"

"I don't need it."

"Really.....Well then, let's begin," Nina declared with an "I won't lose" kind of air.

Naruki placed the baton in front of herself, as if to hide her left hand. On the contrary, Nina's iron whip in her left hand was out, and the other iron whip hung loosely in her right hand. The two faced each other like reflections, as if one was right-handed and the other was left-handed. In fact, both were right handed. Naruki's stance was somewhat unique. The hand with the rope was placed behind her back as if asking her opponent to guess what she had hidden behind her.

Nina's victory was unshakable to Layfon. Nina's training leaned more on the skill of martial arts than on strength itself, as she had to practice wielding an iron whip with one hand. The flow of strength and its use was the essence of martial arts. Naruki's martial arts weren't too bad, but that was judged on the level of a first year. As for Naruki's advantages, Layfon had to count the light weight of her body. Though she was tall, Naruki excelled at agility. The symbol of light weight was Shante from the 5th platoon, but Naruki gave off a different sense. A graceful and light body weight to wield the unique weapon of a rope. But she had an overwhelming disadvantage in this test since she wasn't good at External Burst type Kei. How would she overcome this problem.....?

She made her move as Layfon thought of that question.

"....!"

Naruki breathed out to disperse the heat of Internal Kei and charged straight at Nina. The baton struck. No unnecessary movements there. Nina's left iron whip blocked the baton, and Naruki stepped forward with the momentum of her charge. Nina's right hand whip lashed down.

Something happened.

Keeping her body slightly bent forward, Naruki rushed out and threw herself into the air. The rope shot out from her left hand. Nina's right iron whip tore apart the air. Noticing Naruki's movement, she leaped to flip her body in the air. And in that one moment, her left iron whip interfered with the rope. The claw on the tip of the rope clutched the iron whip.

(It worked.....)

Layfon widened his eyes. Naruki's strategy had worked.....She probably didn't think it would work. The chance result came about when Nina attempted to right herself in the air. As Nina's body flipped, the rope trailing the claw followed her movement to wrap itself about her body. Nina landed like a silkworm wrapped in silk . Her right hand remained free but Naruki had sealed her basic movement.

Surprise appeared on Naruki's face. Nina smiled bitterly at her own mistake.

"But this isn't the end," Nina said and raised the right iron whip. Naruki took hold of the rope with her right hand and readied her stance.

Nina breathed in deeply and increased the amount of her internal Kei to raise the strength in her arm. She probably planned to pull the rope. Naruki resisted by increasing her Internal Kei too. Now it came down to deciding the winner with Kei. As expected, Nina had the advantage. Her speed of Kei generation was quicker because of what Layfon had taught her. Naruki's feet began to slip. The balance of strength began to topple.

"You're doing something interesting."

Layfon explained the circumstances to Sharnid and Felli. Felli was there, standing before the door when the two began their match. Sharnid arrived later.

"Oh? .....They're all serious."

"How redundant," Felli said expressionlessly.

"She'd still be part of the platoon if she didn't return the badge," Sharnid said just as the outcome showed itself.

"Ah....."

Twisting her body, Nina had pulled Naruki over to her. The rope loosened. Nina's free left hand let go of the iron whip and gave the rope a pull. Naruki's body flew into the air.

(Quite meaningful to add Karen Kei there.)

Nina's iron whip pressed lightly on Naruki, who was on the floor.

"You passed," Nina said.

"Thanks," Naruki stood up and lowered her head.

"We're counting on you from now on," Nina smiled and nodded .

The usual dominating air was absent from her smile. Layfon thought her concentration wasn't as sharp since the match with the 10th platoon. Her mistake in the fight with Naruki showed the same thing. Sometimes.....Just a second, but it appeared her thoughts were on something else during training. Nina had felt something from Dinn's ending, an ending born out of the desire to protect the city. Was it all right for Layfon to leave this alone? In the past month, he had acted as if he didn't notice her preoccupation, trying his best to prevent her from being hurt.

"Good. We'll start today's training, but before that....." Nina began, having confirmed all members had arrived. Harley didn't show up. He was at the research lab as usual.

"The camp has been canceled. But I still want us to go before the next match comes up."

All teaching was temporarily suspended during the time when Zuellni was resupplying. Nina had wanted the team to go on a training camp at that time, but she had to cancel it because of the illegal drug investigation.

"But we have classes now. Can we?"

"I advocate both academics and Military Arts. I really want to attend class if possible, but we're facing the 1st platoon in the next match. The atmosphere of each match is also getting more tense. I just want us to do what we can for now."

"Well, I welcome the idea since I can be publicly truant."

Nina smiled bitterly at Sharnid's reply and looked at Layfon and the others.

"If the Captain's decided, then I've no problem with it," he said.

"I think there's a way to resolve the problem with missing class," Naruki said.

Nina accepted their answers and at last turned her gaze to Felli.

"What do you think?"

"".....Whatever you say."

As expected, Felli's answer was weak.

"Then I'll announce the details of the schedule tomorrow. For today's training, we'll analyze tactics in the audio-visual room. We'll look at all the matches of the 1st platoon in recent years."

Everyone moved towards the audio-visual room. Only the "try as hard as possible not to know any information about the opponents" Layfon stayed in the training room.

"Camp.....I wonder what it'll be like," he murmured to himself.

"Have you told them?"

Layfon turned around at Nina's sudden question. They were cleaning at the Mechanical Department. Layfon and Nina were in the same team. Since the resupply, Zuellni had been moving towards the tropics, so the inside of the Mechanical Department was hotter than before. Both Layfon and Nina had taken off the outer layer of the working clothes and wrapped it around their waists.

"Eh?"

Layfon wiped sweat off his face with the towel hanging around his neck. Nina was also sticky with sweat. The sweat stuck the clothes to her skin and outlined her body. Layfon didn't know where to look so he only concentrated on her face. She was also wiping her face with her towel.

"To Naruki and the others. You haven't told them yet?" As if she hadn't noticed his awkwardness, she started mopping the floor again. He followed suit.

"Ah, yes....."

Meishen and her friends knew of the term Heaven's Blade successor before the match last month. He didn't know where they heard of that term, but he knew they knew it had something to do with himself. It seemed they still didn't know much of his past. Was this a good or bad thing? .....He couldn't decide. Heaven's Blade successors and his past in Grendan weren't things he could tell anyone about in a peaceful manner. What would Meishen and her friends do if they found out.....Either way, he doubted it'd be a good reaction. But he wasn't sure whether it was right to not tell them anything because he didn't know how they'd react. He had told everyone in the 17th platoon about his past. Leaving Naruki out would be the same as isolating her, but Meishen and Mifi would find out if he told Naruki.

"What do you think, Captain?"

"Hard to answer," she frowned and stopped mopping. "The problem is we don't know how they'll react. I can't tell since I haven't been with them for long. Layfon, what do you think of them? Do you think they're the type to keep their distance from you once they hear of it?"

"Well....."

He hoped not. That was just his wish. Perhaps they'd keep their distance. In that case.....

(What should I do?)

He had no choice.

"Layfon....."

"Yes?"

Nina had begun mopping the floor while he was spacing out. He quickly followed suit.

".....About that time, sorry about that."

"Eh?" He took his gaze off the floor to look at her.

With her back facing him, she continued, "Despicable.....About the time I said that."

"Ah, yes."

He remembered. Nina learned of his past at the end of the match against the 16th platoon. It was the team's first victory. She knew of his being a Heaven's Blade successor and why he was stripped of his title, as well as his participation in the underground matches. She had asked why he did those things, and he had answered honestly. For money.....She had declared him " despicable."

"I still think what you did was despicable, but you have your reasons to stand firm. To say you're despicable one-sidedly is in itself despicable."

"It wasn't like that."

"No, it was like that," she shook her head. "I said this before. I can't understand the pain of starvation. Someone who knows

nothing and can't imagine what it's like, I don't think she should say it before someone who does know what it's like."

"It probably wasn't like that."

"No, it was like that," Nina shook her head again.

"I think sometimes a third party can more accurately analyze the situation," he said.

"But....."

"At least I think of the Captain's words that way."

"Layfon....."

"Captain isn't wrong," he nodded at Nina who had turned around to face him.

Sitting in the sofa with her chin in her palm, Synola stared at the letter on the desk with annoyance.

"What is it?" the female waiting by her side asked. She was a tall beauty and her appearance was similar to Synola's.

Kanaris Aerifos Rivin. One of the twelve Heaven's Blade successors that people boasted about in Grendan, waited for Synola's answer. Currently, the two of them were in the palace situated in the middle of the Lance Shelled City, Grendan. They were in a room located in the residential area for royalty. Synola Aleisla the senior research student was a fake identity. Her real name was Alsheyra Almonise. She possessed the power of the Queen and stood at the top of the twelve Heaven's Blade successors. Her power exceeded those of the other Heaven's Blade successors. Synola's pupils stared at the words in the letter. Soft lips clamped together, she stayed silent.

"Do you think it's a good plan to bring the Haikizoku from Zuellni to here?" Kanaris asked solemnly.

The letter was sent by Haia Salinvan Laia from Zuellni. The Heaven's Blade successor Synola had exiled from Grendan now lived in that city. Haia had succeeded his master as the third leader of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. The content of the letter explained the event with the Haikizoku.

"I believe no one outside Grendan can fully control the power of a Haikizoku," Kanaris said. Confidence in Grendan's Military Artists showed through her light voice.

"....."

Synola remained silent. She started fingering her hair.

"Your Majesty....."

Synola's lips parted under Kanaris' urging. "So....."

"You weren't planning to say something like 'So annoying', were you?"

".....That's bad. You can't say that ahead of me."

"This isn't a problem of being bad."

Kanaris coldly watched the pouting Synola.

"Since we don't have all 12 Heaven's Blades, we should try to do what we can."

They had hosted numerous Military Arts matches since stripping Layfon of his title. Some participants were powerful enough to fight filth monsters, but none of them had the strength to become a Heaven's Blade successor. Hence, the Heaven's Blade title remained without an owner.

"When Layfon held the Heaven's Blade, I thought, yes, it's finally here. Guess that wasn't the case."

"Your Majesty, no one knows when that day will come. We have had all twelve Heaven's Blades in the past, but that day hasn't come again."

"What about Haia? Can he not be one?"

"Your Majesty, please answer my question first."

"But it really is annoying."

She curled her lips again. Kanaris didn't get mad at her.

"We Heaven's Blade successors can give up our lives for you."

".....Layfon probably wouldn't say things like that."

"That's why he had to give up the Heaven's Blade."

"Would have been good if that were the case."

Losing to Kanaris' imposing manner, Synola listened.

"If your Majesty can't make a decision, how about we make a choice? As said in the letter, using the students of the Academy City would make Layfon our enemy. In that case, the Mercenary Gang won't hold against him. We can leave Lintence out as he's too involved with him, but if it's someone else....."

"".....You're saying you'll use a Heaven's Blade successor without my permission, Kanaris?"

Leaning against the back of the sofa, Synola watched Kanaris.

"N, no.....nothing like that."

She smiled at Kanaris. The Heaven's Blade was panting as if she was short of air. Synola continued with a soft voice. "I did give you the authority while I was away. You did your job well, and that's worth my gratitude.....But only I can decide how to use the Heaven's Blades."

"I'm.....really sorry."

"Seems you understand," she smiled and straightened her back to look outside. Kanaris sat down beside her, more like fell down beside her. She glanced at the trembling woman, took the bag from the table and stood up.

"I have to go to the research lab."

"Your, Your Majesty, please wait....." Kanaris tried again.

Synola smiled bitterly. "Well, I'll take some time to consider it," she said and left the room.

Outside the room was a corridor that connected to the facilities outside the palace. No guards could be seen. This arrangement was made especially for Synola's privacy. The lights in the corridor were weak, as if they weren't used often. Because of the bad location in relation to the position of the sun, the sunlight piercing through the windows was weak too. A figure appeared at the end of the dim corridor.

"What is it?" Synola asked.

The figure moved to where the window was. The shadow shrouding him retreated. It was Savaris.

"Your Majesty is in a good mood.....Ah, what a busy day today. "

Synola sighed against the greeting. ".....Not that good. I didn't get to use my brain today, so I don't feel good."

"Thanks for the hard work," he laughed.

She glared at him, and his laughter stopped short.

"Is the letter the reason behind your bad mood?"

Her eyes narrowed. Was Savaris the only piece of hers that had infiltrated the palace? She watched his smiling face with displeasure. ".....Has the Luckens family got ahead of themselves? Or is this the case with all Heaven's Blades? If so, I've got to tighten them up."

"Not at all! There isn't anything impure in our loyal hearts," he retreated a few steps.

She watched him coldly.

"I found out about the thing at Zuellni by pure chance. It's because my younger brother's there....."

She listened silently to his explanation. Younger brother..... Gorneo was studying Military Arts course at Zuellni. He was in a platoon there.

"I knew of this from Gorneo's letter. I'm guessing the Mercenary Gang had sent Your Majesty a letter about it too. I was waiting here to convey the news in case Your Majesty didn't hear of it."

"You could have told Kanaris."

"It seems that she hates me. Besides, I made a vow to only be loyal to Your Majesty. Not to Kanaris, nor the city named Grendan ." His voice turned light.

"So what do you plan from now on?"

".....You understand when I said I don't feel good?"

"Haha, Kanaris must have been difficult."

She glared at him once more.

"Uh oh.....If possible, why don't you use me?"

"For what?"

"My brother's there. He can help us better than anyone else. And in the possible situation of a fight with Layfon, anyone else would cause huge damage to Zuellni," he laughed.

He was making a joke. Watching him with her icy gaze, Synola tossed out the question as if the idea just popped into her head. " Are you saying you want to kill Layfon?"

"Why?" The smile remained on Savaris' face, but it was definite that the temperature of his expression had dropped a few degrees.

"The bait we used before, the one Layfon crippled, he was from the Luckens' school, wasn't he? Surely you hold a grudge."

"That was only Gahard's immaturity."

The frosty reply meant she had stepped on a landmine.

"Then.....What is it?"

"Your Majesty.....I don't hate Layfon. I'm just very concerned with the Haikizoku," he said frankly. "Your Majesty has always guided us. Heaven's Blades only need to concentrate on getting stronger."

"Well, I at least hope all of you have some common sense."

"Of course."

"Humph.....Well, I'll consider it," she said and started walking.

"Have a good day."

"I will," she waved her hand without turning back.

Chapter 2: The event of that day

It didn't take long to decide the schedule of the camp. Nina had applied for the camp as a study camp. The camp would be treated as part of school, so they didn't have to apply for a holiday.

"Wait a minute.....Three days two nights. Does it include the weekend? So boring."

"Don't plan to go?"

"Since we get to be truant openly, we should apply for normal weekdays. Besides, it's bad for the body to not rest."

Nina's cold gaze rejected Sharnid's suggestion. Though like he said she could have told them the agenda tomorrow, since she was still cleaning at night with Layfon at the Mechanical Department. Layfon wondered how she managed to squeeze out the time for tonight's job. She had been busy running around to various places until training started. The current Nina had regained some of the dominating air she had before. She had probably forgotten about the event surrounding the 10th platoon because of the camp.

Nina had told her team about the schedule of the camp in the training room. The camp would begin three days from now, and it would be three days and two nights over the weekend. The location was the production area of a certain dormitory.

"Excuse me....." Naruki raised her hand. "That place doesn't have any shops. What do we do about food?"

"We'll bring the ingredients over. Layfon knows how to cook, so he'll do the cooking."

"He can?"

"Yeah, well....." Layfon smiled, troubled. Meishen was the one who cooked his lunches. "Yeah, but I won't be able to put much consideration into cooking a nutritious meal."

"It's all right as long as it's delicious," Sharnid patted his back.

Naruki thought for a moment and raised her hand again.

"What?"

"Layfon has to train too. Isn't it better to find someone else to do the cooking?"

"Yes, that was my original plan, but the person I had in mind is already booked that day....." A shadow shrouded Nina's face.

"If it's OK, can I ask for a friend to help?"

"Is it all right?"

"I think so. Layfon knows how the cooking tastes too."

"Is it Mei?" he asked.

"Of course. I don't know anyone else. Not satisfied?"

"No, not at all. Is it really all right?"

Meishen was really shy. She was used to being with him, but not with others. And at the camp, it wasn't possible for Naruki and Layfon to stay with her all the time.

"I'll think of a way about that. Is it ok, Captain?"

"Yeah. I'm counting on you."

Nina explained a few more details about the meet-up time and so on, and they started their usual training.

After listening to Naruki's suggestion, Meishen leaned on the chair with a faraway look. The girls were in the kitchen inside the dormitory. The kitchen was shared, but not everyone had to share a bathroom. Living quarters spread out across the dormitory, and here was the kitchen. Meishen confirmed once again with Naruki. She was preparing for dinner.

"Just.....what did you say?"

"Oh, I mentioned it yesterday. Platoon camp. I recommended you to do the cooking for us. You've decided, haven't you?"

"Wait, wait a minute....."

Naruki peeled the vegetables with a matter-of-fact expression. Hands clutching her apron, Meishen watched Naruki.

"Me.....?"

"Who else? I can't ask Mi."

Mifi wasn't in the kitchen. She was busy writing up drafts in her room.

"But....."

"The Captain's already told the teacher, so you won't be marked absent."

"Au....." Meishen's reason to reject the offer was blocked.

"Why not? It's not easy to get such an opportunity," Naruki cocked her head.

"But.....so sudden....."

"Sudden.....It's not just you and Layton."

"Of, of course."

Just the two of them.....She felt her cheeks heating up.

"Well, it is possible for just the two of you to be alone. Layton seems to know how to cook too. And with his personality, he'll probably offer to help. Everyone else can't do it....." Naruki said and popped a piece of lettuce in her mouth. She chewed.

"Uh.....Wu....."

"You don't have to be so excited. Didn't you two go somewhere before?"

"That was, well, we didn't spend the entire day together."

"You won't be together that long. There is training after all."

Meishen calmed down at that. "But, is it OK? Won't I be in the way?"

"You won't. We won't have to worry about cooking if you take care of it."

"I see....." she began to know where she stood. Cooking. Just as usual. It'd be good if she could help out with that. Just that. Nothing else special would happen. Even if it happened, she wouldn't be prepared for it.

"I just need to cook, right?"

"Didn't I say that from the very beginning?" Naruki nodded.

"So.....naive!" A voice suddenly intervened.

"Mi.....You'll complicate things."

"Agh, so mean! Why am I getting this treatment? I'm protesting. "

"All right, here. Be more honest."

"Am I a kid!? I won't have it.....Not like that," Mifi called, putting a vegetable in her mouth. "How can you leave it like that? Isn't this a good chance?"

"Chance.....What?"

"About the Heaven's Blade."

The feeling was like a knot in Meishen's heart. The letter she received earlier had left a puzzle. The letter was for Layfon, sent by a female named Leerin. The term "Heaven's Blade" was in the letter. It seemed Layfon was called the Heaven's Blade successor back at Grendan. Every city gave its elite Military Artists titles. Back in Meishen's home city, Joeldem, entering the Knights of the Crossroad organization was proof of being acknowledged as an excellent Military Artist. Everyone aimed to enter that organization. Heaven's Blade successor probably held the same meaning. She wasn't surprised to find out that Layfon had such a title because she believed he was very strong. But then why did he leave Grendan? She had asked him once but she failed. She was afraid that question would break the relationship between them. It didn't. But for the sake of not failing again, she wouldn't put that question to him again.

"Forget it."

Naruki frowned.

"Everyone has something they don't want others to know right? Layton would have said it if it's something that doesn't really matter."

"That makes sense. But.....Isn't it easier to hang out with him if you know his secret?"

"Um....." Naruki responded to Mifi's words.

"I knew it. You were thinking of something after that match, weren't you, Nakki? It's got something to do with Layfon?"

"No. Wouldn't I have lost the trust between us if I kept something from you guys?"

"You'll say it if you can?"

"Look, what does this have to do with Layton?"

"Isn't that natural? The basis of the relationship between me and you and the relationship between me and Layton is different."

"What would be different?"

"I know you'd cry from wetting your bed."

"What!" Naruki blushed. "I, I didn't cry! And that just happened once....."

"You did, though you were trying not to. The tears just fell from your eyes. Aaah, I can still recall it now. The Nakki of that time..... "

"Shut up!" Naruki bent over Mifi, locking her neck in the crook of her arm. Meishen just moaned and didn't do anything.

Mifi beat the floor with her arm. "No! That wasn't what I wanted to say. I mean, we knew each other since we were little. We can trust each other even if we hide a thing or two, but it's different with Layton. We don't understand him. We don't know anything about him before he came to Zuellni, that's why we want to know. And why we are concerned."

"Um....." Naruki loosened her hold. Mifi took the chance to escape.

"Anyway, what I wanted to say was if we want to understand Layton, we also need to understand the Layton of Grendan. That's all! I'm hungry!" she quickly left the kitchen.

".....Geez, she just says whatever suits her," Naruki glared in the direction where Mifi had gone, off to her own room. Naruki's face was still red.

"Mei, don't worry about it."

".....Yeah."

But Mifi was right. Layton had only been in Zuellni for half a year. He had in him the Layfon who grew up in Grendan. That

was why Meishen was bothered. She was jealous of Leerin because Leerin knew of the Layfon in Grendan.

(But.....am I too spoiled?)

This uneasiness had always been circling inside her, unable to leave. It might explain why the taste of dinner didn't go well. Naruki and Mifi noticed that the taste wasn't as good as usual, but they didn't comment.

(Is this trust? Or pity?)

For some reason, Meishen was more confused.

Someone pinched her face and brought her back to reality.

"What're you doing?" Synola lay flat on her stomach on top of the table.

"A report.....is what."

They were in the library. The computer terminal on the table showed a number of technical books on its monitor. Leerin was reading them for her report.

"Really.....?"

"What?"

"No.....You were staring pretty blankly. Do you know when I got here?"

"Huh?"

The students weren't allowed to take books outside the library, so the library provided many areas for self-study. A number of huge tables sat side by side in the area Leerin was in. Many students came here to study after class. In fact, there were many students around Leerin right now. Yes, it was a large table. Synola had her chin in her palm. She had pushed aside the terminals and stationary of other students.

The students around them were all watching them.

"Hey! .....What're you doing?" Leerin quickly lowered her voice.

"Me? Aah.....I waited a long time. Though I was about to lose to shame....." Synola's face was red.

"Please hurry and get off!"

Unable to stand the atmosphere of you're-an-interference, Leerin escaped from the library to return the computer.

"Ah, you're so mean. Wait up," Synola called and chased after her.

"I'm worried because you were spacing out."

"Then worry in a way that is appropriate!" she protested with a red face.

"Aah, don't praise me."

".....Tell me just how did I praise you?"

"Ehh, don't be so boring. I'll treat you to a meal," Synola insisted as she followed her.

"I refuse. Senpai, you always take me to someplace expensive. I feel like I'm in danger." She was used to a life of thriftiness. She couldn't understand Synola's perspective in the use of money.

"Ah, then it's ok if it's some cheaper place? Good. There's this place I want to go."

"Uh? Wait....."

Ignoring what Leerin had to say, Synola took her hand and dragged her away.

Synola took Leerin to a park close to the bus station.

"This?"

She could feel the heat through the paper bag. Many small shops stood before the bus station at the school, ranging from convenience stores to grocery stores. A student who lived alone would be very grateful for this shopping street.

In one of the shops here.....The two of them held something that they bought from one of the shops.

"Yes. I wanted to try this," Synola took out the food from the bag with a happy expression. Sugar stuck to the surface of the fried bread.

"......How should I put this. Senpai is really rich."

She hasn't had fried bread.....Shocked at that fact, Leerin also started eating. The softness and sweetness of the bread dispersed in her mouth. It didn't taste like the bread was fried in oil used for a long time, and the bread hadn't been over-fried either.

"Mm, yum. This is great."

Synola finished one swiftly and took out another piece of bread. Finding herself getting hungry after having one, Leerin also took

out another bread to eat. Synola kept repeating "yum, yum" beside her as they finished eating the bread.

"Mm, haven't had enough," Synola said softly, licking the sugar on her hands.

"No. We ate too much."

Synola had ordered twice the amount as Leerin. She finished all that in the time it took Leerin to just finish her own bag of bread. Leerin sighed, looking at Synola's body.

"How can you keep so fit?"

"With an adequate amount of exercise."

That was all she said. Leerin groaned and caressed her stomach.

"Isn't it about time to tell me of your worries?" Synola sipped from the cup of hot tea she bought and looked at her.

"Huh?"

"Your worry is still there, right? How is it?"

"I didn't....."

"Or was there progress? Did it give you new worries?"

"No. I....." she denied desperately, but Synola continued.

"Well, you were like someone climbing up from a dark chasm before, and now you have this confused, reddened face that suddenly sinks in shadows. Like a flea."

"Ah....." she didn't realize that was what Synola felt about her. .....Thinking of how she appeared in others' eyes made her feel embarrassed.

"So what're you worrying about? Let me solve it for you."

"No, uh....." Though she denied it, Leerin changed the topic. ". .....There's someone I want to see."

The day of the camp had arrived. They departed from the tram and walked through a field of fruit trees. A light breeze carried the aroma of the field to them. The horizon widened when they reached the end of the field.

"Wow....." Layfon called out at the vast plain before them. He was carrying a bag stuffed with his clothes and some other luggage. He held bulging bags with his two hands. The bags contained the food that he and Meishen and the others bought at the shops. Naruki was loaded down too.

"So huge....."

Meishen was speechless.

Opposite the field of fruit trees that they just went past was the lake they saw when Layfon and the three girls went for lunch. They were in an agricultural area. Sunlight reflected off a huge greenhouse. Nina had explained that this was a period of no-planting, so there wasn't any produce here. It was all right even if the team caused huge damage during training.

A lone house stood in the middle of the plain. That was their dormitory. The dormitory became bigger as the team stepped closer on the path.

They only saw how huge the dormitory actually was when they got close.

"We're here."

Nina was waiting for them at the dormitory. She took the bags of food ingredients from Layfon. She thanked Meishen for coming to cook, and Meishen replied in a very small voice. Following behind Meishen, Layfon lifted his head to study the building.

"So big."

Nina also lifted her gaze. "Aah. The students doing agriculture use this building when they work outside, so it can fit around 20 people."

"Amazing."

"This area provides food for Zuellni, so it's pretty huge. You can find this facility in other production areas too.....Here." Nina led them to the kitchen and put the ingredients in the fridge. She told them their room locations, and they dispersed to put down their luggage.

"We've spent today getting here and putting everything in place . Be prepared for training tomorrow," Nina said and took Naruki and Meishen to their rooms.

Left alone, Layfon went to his room to put down his luggage. He pulled aside the window screen and saw that it was almost dusk.

"We're at the edge of the city."

Standing on the second level, he could see the city's outskirts. The dormitory he was in now and the dormitory of the first years... ... The different scenery he looked at now gave him the feeling of being in another city.

In another city.....That kind of lament came to him. The thought of studying at an Academy City was nonexistent to him when he was still a Heaven's Blade successor in Grendan.

There was a reason behind his naive desire. No, the Layfon in Grendan thought his way of doing things was correct. What Nina said was reasonable. Wasn't there another way? Probably. If he had picked another way, Leerin wouldn't be in so much trouble now. Regret and loneliness plagued him.

Leerin, is she still full of energy?

His room at the dormitory being too big might explain his feeling of loneliness. A room big enough to fit three beds. The dormitory was usually for students of the Agricultural course who needed to work very late and had to stay outside. And now only Layfon was using this room. When he was in the orphanage, he had always dreamed of having a room to himself. He was in a large room at the orphanage, but he slept there with everyone else. The current room back at Layfon's usual dormitory was for two people. He did not have a roommate. The feelings of being alone in there and being alone in here shouldn't be different. It only felt different because the size of this room was similar to the room back in the orphanage.

"Aaaah....."

He shook his head and swallowed the nostalgia. He knew well the lonely feeling of being unable to return to that place so long ago. What would happen if a Heaven's Blade went on a rampage.... ..He was the one who answered that question for the public. How could he return to Grendan with that past?

Sharnid and Felli arrived while Layfon mulled over that thought. He was also called over.

The training on that day was simple. Since there wasn't a training room, they did training outside, much the same as they did training in the war field. Training ended when darkness came. Sparse light from the building acted as the only source of light after the sun had set. The team spent some time after training in

the large living room. Nina and Sharnid played a paper game in the Military Arts course that was designed to nurture a mind in terms of tactics. Meishen and Naruki chatted in a corner, Felli read a book she had brought with her. Layfon sat beside Nina and Sharnid, and watched them play the game.

The game was played on two boards with pieces lined up on either side of the boards. Each player was to move his own pieces in accordance to the movement of his opponent. The boards were positioned in a way so the opponent couldn't see the pieces. It was a game of command.

"I got flakes around B6."

"A shame, got nothing there."

"What? Damn.....Finished."

"My turn. Flakes around E3."

".....There's a guard at E2."

"Ah, I'm sniping him.....so."

Nina and Sharnid tossed the dice that had 6 faces, and spoke the result.

"Good. Let's swap."

"So naive. One more sniping."

"Wh.....Damn."

Nina tossed the dice again, and removed her own piece with a painful expression.

"Uh.....Finished."

"It's my turn now. Then....."

The two moved their pieces in front of Layfon, using Psychokinetic flakes to find the position of other pieces and attack them. Sharnid kept winning the game, all the way to victory.

"Geez....."

"That's why I said platoons with a normal structure aren't the only ones that can make the best movements, didn't I? With 2-3 Psychokinesists, the remaining sniper can move around freely."

Staring at the board and pondering on her next move, Nina fiddled with the dice as Sharnid talked.

"You're so noisy. Be quiet."

"Decide on a better structure next time."

"No, I'm using the same structure."

"Then you can only rely on the luck of the dice."

Knowing Nina wouldn't take his suggestion, he sighed and placed his pieces with the same structure as before. Nina didn't win the following three games either.

"Just a bit more....."

"Let's stop here," Sharnid put down his piece and put up his arms.

"Um.....I guess. It's already that late. Getting ready for the bath? "

"Ah, there is a bath?" Naruki asked.

"Ah, a very big bath.....Oh no, forgot to let the hot water run," Nina looked at the clock.

"Sorry, let's just take a shower. I'll put in the hot water tomorrow."

The bath was for both male and female. The girls went on ahead on Nina's direction, as Layfon and Sharnid watched them leave.

"Oh.....There's a big bath, really?....." Sharnid said to himself. Layfon pretended he didn't hear him.

Layfon opened his eyes at the tiny noise reaching his ears. He had slept enough. He slipped off the bed to pull open the blinds on the window. The morning air was a bit cold. He stretched his arms,

went to wash his face and automatically headed for the source of the noise. A figure was in the kitchen where a wonderful breakfast had already been prepared.

"Meishen, you're up early."

"Wa..... Layton?" Meishen turned around in surprise. She was holding the wok. "Sorry, I haven't finished making breakfast."

"It's ok. Let me help."

"Huh? But....."

"I woke up without knowing," he said and started washing the vegetables. "That's a lot."

"Ah, yeah..... I want to prepare for dinner too." She had prepared two pans of food.

"Ah, I'll handle the vegetables. You can work on something else, " he said and peeled off the skin of the vegetables.

".....But the other dishes will get cold if I finish them first."

"Ah, true." He had bought the ingredients with Meishen, so he had a general idea on what dishes she'd make. They stood side by side, peeling green vegetables.

"Layton.....You're good at this," she said with wide eyes.

"I've been helping since I was little. I have confidence in my food-preparing speed."

"I see."

He memorized the shape of the bean with his finger, then quickly sliced it out with the knife without having to look at it. The color of Meishen's face changed at that, and Layfon noticed her change of color.

"What is it?"

"Huh? No, nothing," she shook her head with a smile, knowing the change in her face. Voicing an "Ah!".....Layfon guessed the reason.

(Perhaps.....)

"But I'm not good at considering what dishes to make. I didn't think of balancing the nutrients. I just made dishes, and that always made her angry."

".....Is that so?"

"Uh, I made Leerin angry."

"Huh?"

"Ah, Leerin is my childhood friend....." And like that, Layfon told her about Leerin, how he cooked with her and what laughable moments he was involved in. He took care of explaining it so that she wouldn't mistake him as a good cook and think it was redundant to make him lunches.

Meishen listened to him with a smile. But he didn't notice how her expression hadn't changed when he finished talking.

And during this time outside the kitchen...

"......I can't hear," Felli said as she peered into the kitchen with her body pressed against the wall. It seemed Layfon and Meishen were chatting. A good relationship. Felli couldn't hear anything as the kitchen was big. But she could see Meishen smiling.

"Just a bit more."

She wanted to get closer, but that would mean stepping into the kitchen and being discovered by Layfon. And if she stepped even closer, Meishen would see her.

"I have to use Psychokinesis." As she considered this with a half serious attitude, footsteps neared her. Felli jumped back from the wall immediately and composed her face as if she had just arrived.

It was Nina.

"Good morning."

"Ah, morning," Nina greeted her. Her gaze flashed towards the kitchen. "Are they making breakfast?" Her nose twitched.

Steam rose from the two pans. The smell of food drifted over to the girls. In one pan were the vegetables Meishen had peeled and cut into small pieces. The other pan contained soup. On the other side was Layfon, busy peeling a huge amount of vegetables.

"Do they need help....." Nina scratched her head.

"Ye.....Yeah."

Good to use "help" as an excuse to check the inside of the kitchen. But.....

"Not good. I'm not good at this at all," Nina smiled bitterly. She was the same as Felli.

"Captain.....Have you cooked before?" Felli asked.

"Yes, but.....I was forced to cook. My mother believes the kitchen is a woman's fortress, so she always made me help out and do simple things.....I did them, but not very well. I thought it was more meaningful to spend time practicing with dad, so I always escaped from the kitchen."

Felli was different. She grew up in a family unrelated to Military Arts. Every generation made its living off buying and selling information on cities. Karian came to the Academy City for two reasons, to know more of other cities, and to also memorize how information flowed between cities. That was Felli's family. A family that hired many, many servants. Of course, specialized people were hired to be responsible for meals. A kitchen was a place where Felli would be given sweets. She had never touched a kitchen knife before coming to Zuellni. And she didn't have any interest in cooking after coming to Zuellni, so her cooking skill hadn't improved either.

Felli and Nina stood motionless at the door when Naruki finally arrived.

"Morning.....What're you doing?"

"Ah....." Nina mumbled.

Naruki looked inside the kitchen, called out that she'd help, and stepped inside.

"Does she know how to cook?"

"Probably."

Naruki joined in the peeling of vegetables.

"She does."

"Yeah."

The voices of those two, mixed with complicated feelings, spread out in the corridor. Someone laughed behind them and they turned around to see Sharnid, a towel hanging down his neck .

"Ah, you seem to be doing something interesting."

"Shut up," Nina curled her lips. Felli glared at him.

"Humph.....I'll tell you the greatest tool just for you two."

"Huh?"

"......What?"

They watched him with suspicion and anticipation. Sharnid took out a small tool from somewhere.

"This is a peeler. An easy tool to use for peeling the skin of vegetables."

"What.....!?"

"Just move the blade back and forth on the surface of vegetables , then you can easily peel off the skin."

"What a convenient tool," Nina sighed honestly. Felli's expression remained unchanged, but she stared at the tool as if she wanted to eat it. The small blade was set securely between two pieces of thin metal plates. It seemed the tool really could easily peel off the skin by moving it along the vegetables.

"Here. Just use this and peel all you want."

Felli reached out without thinking.....and caught Nina's hand. Both of them took hold of the peeler at the same time.

".....Can you let go?" Felli said calmly.

"No, just leave this to me." Nina held tightly to the peeler.

"Is it all right for the Captain not to think of today's training?"

"Why don't you think of your individual training for today? I can't do much for Psychokinesis training."

"You don't have to worry. I've always been doing that."

"I did my preparation already."

Tension rose quietly between the two of them, revolving around the peeler. And.....

".....What're you doing?" Layfon stood at the door of the kitchen .

An opening.

"Ah!"

Nina snatched the peeler from Felli's hold. "Ah, you guys seem busy, so I came to help."

"Oh, we already finished," Layfon smiled. Felli saw Nina tremble slightly. Looking at her, Felli stood as if frozen.

"Breakfast's almost done. Please help finish the rest," he said and went back to his room.

The sound of oil cooking in the pan and the smell of soup drifted from the kitchen.

Training started after breakfast. The team didn't do much training in the first day of the three day, two night camp. They probably couldn't do much tomorrow either, so today was important. Nina called everyone over after they all did some warm-up exercises.

"Today's training will be a match."

Nina held two flags.

"Hold on, wait a minute," Sharnid raised his hand.

"What?"

"We don't have enough people for a match?"

"If that's all, it's simple. Layfon."

"Yes?"

"You stay here alone."

"Yeah....."

"Wait a minute," Naruki said. "Is this really ok?"

She knew from the match with the 10th platoon as to how strong Layfon was, but it couldn't be possible for Layfon to win 1 against 4.

"Well, you'll see," Nina said meaningfully. She tossed a flag to Layfon. Sharnid didn't say anything more and began his preparation. Only Naruki took out her Dite to confirm its weight with displeasure.

Layfon was to defend his flag and waited at the location Nina had indicated. He pierced the ground with the flag. Nina had talked to Layfon before he made a move. He seemed surprised but he nodded.

Then came the call for Naruki and Sharnid.

"How do we attack?" Nina asked Naruki.

"One person? Two people to stop him from moving while the remaining person aims for the flag?"

"Let's do that then. I'll head for the flag. Naruki acts as bait and Sharnid, you stop Layfon. Felli will be my support."

Meishen waited at a distance with a gun in her hand. Nina nodded at her, and she raised the gun and pulled the trigger with trepidation. The hollow noise dispersed to announce the beginning of the match.

"Ten steps to your left, please move forward in a curved path."

Naruki ran as such, following Felli's instruction from the transmitter. Nina ran beside her. Layfon was closer to Naruki's right.

"If he attacks me then you head straight for the flag. Same for the reverse. If he attacks Sharnid then we'll both move for the flag," Nina said.

"Roger."

Nina pulled open the distance between her and Naruki as Naruki increased her speed.

Layfon stood leisurely before the flag with no defensive mechanisms in front of him. He hadn't restored his Dite. Naruki could clearly see him and he saw her clearly too. But this was a one against four match. He was at a disadvantage.

When Naruki and her team had run halfway to the flag, Layfon made his move.

No. He disappeared.

Because she was running and enveloped in the wind created by her own movement, Naruki couldn't detect the direction of the natural wind around her. All she saw was the dust made by Layfon's feet.

"Coming. 0400," Felli said.

"Behind?" Naruki slid to a stop.

"There's not enough Kei in your legs," Layfon's voice sounded from her side, then he was in front of her. The next moment he was behind her.

(What speed!)

Naruki swung with the baton as she slid on the ground. The baton hit air. Layfon was gone. As the thought flashed past Naruki , she felt something on her stomach. Her gaze turned down and saw Layfon there with his shoulder against her stomach, and he threw her up and away.

As Naruki stared numbly at the sky, Layfon chased after Nina. In no time at all, he had reached her and also tossed her into the sky.

The sound of a sniper rifle firing reached Naruki's ear. Then a small explosion in the air.

By no means could she have immediately realized it was caused by external Kei striking down a Kei bullet aimed at the flag. As Naruki realized that fact, Sharnid had also been tossed skyward.

Layfon walked casually back to the flag. Felli didn't put up any resistance.

"We lost....." Naruki watched Layfon's back with disbelief.

"How do we attack next?" Nina said as if she was enjoying it. Naruki still had an unbelievable feeling in her.

(That's.....Layfon?)

Layfon was once again on the defensive side.

The Layfon with Naruki and her friends, chatting on the way to class, always had this unreliable feel with him. Where now was the Layfon she knew? No,

Naruki knew he was strong as a Military Artist. She could tell during the platoon matches when she was in the audience seat and when she was participating in the match. She knew he never stepped back from the famous organization of Military Artists, the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang. He even won against the Mercenary Gang's leader. He was strong. Very, very strong.

But Naruki's feelings were different when she fought Layfon. Different from the time when she and Layfon were paired up in Military Arts course training class. Layfon had moved taking her strength into consideration.

And now it was totally different. She lost by an overwhelming margin. Even so, he defeated her by holding back. First, he didn't use his Dite. Not just that either. He didn't hit her with his bare hands. He just tossed her up. The strength of everyone on the team was too far away from his.

Nina and the rest of her team devised their strategy in detail once again. Anger rushed up in Naruki. She wasn't thinking of giving up, but she didn't like Layfon's arrogant attitude.

"Then let's begin," Nina said and nodded.

Looking at her, Naruki smiled.

Meishen made a huge number of sandwiches and cookies for lunch. Everyone ate till their stomachs burst, as they replenished the amount of sugar they lost in training. They drank sports drinks and then continued training.

The formation remained the same. Layfon was on the defensive side, and Nina's team repeatedly changed their strategies. They didn't once win against him. Nina stopped the match when the sky was painted red. Everyone started their own individual training. Layfon finally restored his Dite and began dancing with it on his own. Nina did the same. Felli let loose all of the flakes, sending

them off to faraway places. Sharnid prepared a number of solid balls made of soil. He threw each of them and shot them down in succession.

Naruki couldn't move at the moment. She drank from the sports drink that Meishen had brought to her and laid on the ground, breathing deeply. When she could finally sit up, she slowly drank and watched Layfon. As if penetrating the deepening red dusk with a pen, Layfon repeatedly swung the Sapphire Dite. Internal Kei filled his body. He should have been causing a lot of wind with his movements, but his surroundings were surprisingly quiet.

Naruki had watched Nina's individual training alongside Layfon. She thought Nina's pose was very beautiful as she swung the Kei-filled iron whips like a spirit. The current Nina didn't have the air she had before. She was even more beautiful, stretching the definition of sports, but she shone less compared to Layfon. With Layfon, it felt as if something had ended. Naruki wasn't sure what it was. Every time the sword cut out a green flash in the dusk, she felt a strike in her chest.

Loneliness, solemnity and the feeling of a wish in those sword strokes.

All of those feelings made her hesitate. She turned around and saw that Meishen had gone. She must have gone to prepare dinner .

(What a shame.)

She sighed, attracted to Layfon's figure. If Meishen was here, she'd probably cry. For some reason, each of Layfon's movements exuded something painfully beautiful. They made her contemplate what kind of a past he had. The Layfon who usually appeared weak and unreliable.

(Ah, yes.....)

She understood. This was probably the Layfon that Meishen liked. She didn't know whether Meishen realized it the time when she first entered the Academy City, but she had felt it.

Naruki's superior, Formed, had said this. "That person has had a life that doesn't match his age. You should observe him and understand that kind of depth."

That was the reason why Naruki chose to stay with the 17th platoon. Just what had Formed seen? That curiosity intensified during the match with the 10th platoon. Was that depth what Naruki was seeing now?

Probably. She couldn't really express it any better.

She stood and began her own training. If she kept relaxing, she'd only become a burden. She could not tolerate this point on the pride of her identity as a Military Artist. She struck the air with her baton.

Nina announced the end of training when dusk gave way to true

darkness. The aroma of food filled the kitchen. Meishen had prepared the meal in the morning. It wasn't the simple vegetable soup that she made for them for breakfast.

"Amazing," Sharnid groaned. His appetite grew with the aroma of meat and vegetable. The meat had been marinated for a long period of time.

"......I, I made a lot. So....."

"Oh, thanks very much. I'll eat lots," Sharnid sat down, and everyone else followed suit. Layfon and Naruki helped put out the dishes.

"Ah, sorry. We'll....." Nina said.

"Don't worry. Leave this to us," Layfon said.

Meishen had also made salad and chicken. The helpers sat down at the desk after lining up the dishes of food.

The food was true to Meishen's skill. The team ate without speaking, enjoying the meal. Nina was worried that the delicious taste and empty stomachs might cause terrible side effects, but seeing how everyone dug into the food without complaint, she relaxed and happily watched them eat.

After dinner, Layfon watched Nina and Sharnid play their game. Naruki went over to him and said. "Layton, do you have a second?" She then walked out of the room. Meishen was outside too.

Layfon thought the time had finally come. Neither Nina nor Sharnid noticed. They were concentrating on the game, and Felli was reading her book in a corner. He stood up and went after Naruki.

Nina's gaze shifted to look at Layfon's back.

"What will come will come. Either way, it's difficult to keep your secret in the team. Since it'll come out anyway, it should come from you, not anyone else. You're the one to make the decision in the end."

Nina had said that in the Mechanical Department, but that didn't lessen Layfon's worry.

"Well, there has to be a way," Sharnid said as he played with the dice.

"Naruki plans to join the police force, so she's got a strong sense of morality. That is worrying."

"Even someone as stubborn as you accepted him, so it should be all right."

"I'm not stubborn."

"The only one who truly doesn't understand you is yourself, is it ?" Sharnid smiled as Felli left the room stealthily. She must have gone after Layfon.

"Aren't you going?" He asked Nina as if he had eyes on his back .

"No," she gave a curt reply and continued to look at the board.

Sharnid's smile was bitter as he rolled the dice.

Layfon left the building. The half moon and the stars gave off the only light besides the light in the building. He could have used internal Kei to strengthen his night vision, but he only followed Naruki and Meishen, submerging himself in darkness. As if feeling unease at walking in the dark, Meishen held Naruki's hand.

They kept walking like that on uneven ground, under the lights of the sky. If they went any further, they might encounter danger. But Layfon didn't say that. Probably nothing would happen with him and Naruki here. He stole a glance back and saw that the light from the dormitory was within sight. That eased his heart.

In the end, the three of them reached the edge of that place. The line of trees cut through the field as if dividing it from another field. Meishen stopped before the wall of trees, and Naruki stopped too. Layfon did the same. Meishen turned around. He couldn't see her expression in the dark. Naruki broke the silence.

"If Mi were here, the formation would be complete.....but that can't be helped. Layton, we want to know more about you," she said in the straightforward way of a Military Artist.

"Yeah," he nodded in the dark.

Silence once again enshrouded them.

".....I hope you can understand this curiosity of ours. We've had a good relationship with you for half a year. We aren't worried of leaving our home city. The relationship between us three girls is very good, so we were shocked when Layton came among us. We don't want our relationship with you to remain as it is. We want you to join our group. Therefore, there are things we want to know ."

Meishen trembled and swallowed.

".....What is a Heaven's Blade successor?"

As expected, Naruki was the one to voice the question. She then explained how she knew of that term, of how Leerin's letter was wrongly delivered to Meishen's mailbox, and how Meishen had read the letter.

Layfon was shocked. That was the letter that Nina had handed him. At that time, he hadn't known why Nina had the letter. She said she had picked it up in the changing room in the Training Complex. The doubt of why she had that letter had always been with him.

".....I'm sorry," Meishen apologized with a trembling voice. A tear rolled in her eye.

"It doesn't matter."

Even if he had felt anything, he didn't plan to scold her.

"A Heaven's Blade successor....." Releasing the breath that had at some point accumulated inside him, he explained everything.

There were twelve Heaven's Blades, twelve Dites in Grendan that only twelve people could gain. Those people were called Heaven's Blade successors, and Layfon was one of them. He was the twelfth Heaven's Blade successor, called Layfon Wolfstein Alseif. But he was neither happy nor boastful of receiving that title. He only concentrated on making money with the skill that he had, and that was all he cared about. Money was necessary for survival. The Layfon back then was like a gear leaving its path to spin in the air. The crisis of the food shortage had passed, but as long as one had money, one could buy as much food as one wanted. He was still small during the most difficult time. He understood the basics of an economy, that food was scarce, but his adopted father, Derek, lived a poor life. Layfon blindly followed his own desire in his actions. He believed it was correct to break the principles of Military Arts. He didn't feel repulsed at participating in underground matches.

He felt something from Naruki when he mentioned underground matches. For someone working in the City Police with a strong sense of morality, she'd probably find this unbelievable.

".....And then?" Meishen asked as if squeezing her voice out.

"I was exposed, stripped of my title and exiled from the city. It was Her Majesty's mercy to give me time before the punishment and not to confiscate all my possessions. Because of that, I could leave some money for the orphanage."

Yes.....Derek managed the orphanage with the principle of being poor. The orphanage lacked money because of all sorts of problems. Layfon could solve it. His way was correct. While he was a Heaven's Blade successor, he donated money to other orphanages too, so he didn't have much money left when he was exiled.

".....That's why you're here?"

"Yes," he nodded after calming down. He had been extremely tense while walking over here with them, but he had calmed down after explaining his past.

(Let it go as it goes.)

He didn't deny his feelings. Meishen and Naruki were the ones to decide what to do after listening to his past. He couldn't do anything. He knew his past actions were wrong, but he didn't think his way of thinking was wrong. Perhaps the power of Military Artists, Layfon's ability, was necessary to protect the city. But Layfon couldn't accept the fact that he could not protect the people around him. Naruki had said before that in a choice between the city and the people, she'd choose the people. Layfon probably had the same thinking as she. Because of that, he could not become a Heaven's Blade successor.

"But the real problem isn't my participating in the underground matches."

The match with Gahard Baren was the real reason behind Layfon's exile.

"All Heaven's Blades are monsters whose Kei far exceeds that of any other Military Artists. If that monster betrayed the principle of Military Arts and felt nothing for it.....Nobody must know of that. Heaven's Blades can easily overwhelm the Military Artists that other Military Artists can't win against. Nobody must know of that ."

The problem was Layfon trampling Gahard with Kei that far exceeded what was normal.

"I.....am a monster," he called himself. "So it's right to fear me."

Naruki held her breath. Meishen trembled, wrapping her arms around herself. Had they received his message? He couldn't tell with Meishen but Naruki should have gotten it. She had gone through training with him and she had seen his fight with Haia. Though they only showed one part of Layfon's true strength.

Layfon had said what he had to say. Now he waited for their response. He couldn't see their expressions in the dark. Were they shocked? Scared? Crying.....

"......I," Meishen said. "I......"

Her trembling voice stopped.

"I......"

Rumbling.....

"Huh?"

The ground suddenly shook. Moonlight lit up Meishen's face as she took a step forward. Tears filled her eyes. Her expression turned stiff at the change of the environment. A bad feeling hit Layfon. He rushed out to grab hold of her wrist.

"Nakki!" he called.

The ground vanished underneath them and gravity pulled them down.

(We're falling.)

Naruki reacted quickly. She snatched out her Dite and restored it, tossing up the rope that Harley made. Layfon heard the sound of it wrapping around something.

"Layton!" Naruki reached out her hand to him. With one arm wrapped around Meishen, he stretched out his other arm.....and couldn't reach. His fingers brushed past Naruki's, and he fell into darkness with Meishen.

Chapter 3: Darkness. And then...

Plunged into the depths of the earth, Layfon's left hand reached out for his weapon harness, took out his Dite and restored it. The sound of rumbling shook his eardrums. He extended his Kei to the blade. The weak moonlight reflected off the soil falling down on them and sustained his vision. It'd have been great if he could use the steel threads, but they would be trapped in the rain of soil.

"Tsk!"

At the moment the flash of green light burst forth from his blade, the situation left Layfon speechless. He swung the blade with Meishen in his arm. Huge slabs of soil fell down above them. Even though the soil was soft, that size and mass was enough to kill anyone underneath it. Kei shot out from the tip of the blade to destroy the soil slabs. But that wasn't just it. Layfon detected the sound of soil striking metal. That must be it. That was the metal fence used to support and protect the city. Since it was falling for such a long time, it seemed even the ground of the organic field had collapsed. The falling soil blocked Layfon's sight and hid within it a large number of killing weapons.

Tension ran calmly through him. He adjusted his position to better use the sword.

(If it's only me.....)

If it was just him, he could manage this situation, but he was currently holding Meishen. His movements were hugely limited. They included his sword swings, his speed and Kei. Meishen, as a non-Military Artist, probably couldn't stand the situation.

"....."

Meishen held tightly to him. He continued swinging the sword to strike down the huge slabs descending on them. While he regretted that he could not use his right hand, soil and metal fence closed in on them. Soil particles hit their skin, and the veins weaving through the ground of the organic field struck their backs. He swung in the direction of the low echo he heard. The blade shattered the two metal fences, throwing off sparks at the contact. Layfon used the faint light of the sparks to confirm their situation. He twisted to stand on one of the passing fences, using it to extend his area of movement and stably swing his sword.

(I might ruin it again.)

He was using the sword with his movements restricted. His cutting paths were absolutely horrible. He could only use external type Kei and shatter the obstacles with brute force, which wasn't very good on the sword blade.

(Please last.)

Praying like that, he continued to cut through the things falling on them. And like that, he concentrated on the crisis above them. As moonlight left them, Layfon used the sparks caused by his

strike and the sound of falling obstacles to defend themselves. His tension was reaching its limit. He calculated the distance between them and the ground through the echo of metal striking the bottom.

But something unexpected happened.

"Ah."

"Wuah!"

Just a bit more.... As he thought of this, the ground beneath them shook. Other things that had fallen past Layfon had piled on top of one another to make a hill. The metal fence he was standing on crashed against a metal fence buried in the hill. He pushed against his foothold and flew sideways.

"Aaaaaaa."

To fall and then to rise, Meishen became more confused. Originally, she suppressed herself and hadn't made a noise, but now she struggled in Layfon's arm.

"Uh."

Pain cut a path between his eye and ear. Probably just some debris. He suppressed the impatience and anxiety rushing through him as he bore that hot pain. Finally, his feet touched the ground, and he used both hands to carry Meishen, running away from the hill to avoid the falling obstacles.

A rumble shook the ground, heading for Layfon from behind him. He jumped and touched the ground. That presence behind him was gone. He didn't sense anything falling on top of them. The sound of the city's moving multi-legs overwhelmed the sound of debris falling. Layfon kept moving forward without thinking. When he stopped, he put Meishen down.

"Ah..... Ah, Ah..... Huh?"

"It's all right. It's all right now."

He couldn't make out her face in the dark. The sudden descent had prevented her from saying anything. He covered her with his jacket and patted her trembling shoulder. He waited for her to calm down, then he stood up.

"I'll just go and check the situation."

"Ah.....!" she grabbed his hand.

"..... Uh, so..... sorry."

As if the darkness had wiped away her voice, she let go of his hand.

(Aa, I see.....)

She must have felt very scared since she couldn't see anything. Layfon abandoned the idea of checking his surroundings and sat down beside her.

"It's ok. Please go."

"It's alright to wait a bit. We can go together afterward."

It'd be good if she was confused as usual. That would be proof of her recovery.

"Speaking of which..... That really was surprising."

Layfon lifted his head and couldn't see anything. He had never thought such a place existed. He thought only the Mechanical Department and its exit would be beneath the city. The truth stared at him when he thought deeper about the issue. How could the underside of the city just be covering up the Mechanical Department? It must envelop a larger area than that.

(This place is close to the city's edge. There must be other mechanisms around to control the city's multi-legs.)

He glanced around. It was still dark everywhere. The sound of rumblings pressed around them. His guess of other mechanisms being close by was correct. He had moved around during the descent, so it wouldn't be surprising if he had moved slightly away from the mechanisms.

"....."

A weak touch on his shoulder. The sound of clothes brushing against clothes. It was Meishen's shoulder.

"Be patient a bit more. They'll definitely find us."

"Yes....."

He took her hand.

"Uh, uh.....Say something," she said.

"Eh?"

"About Grendan."

"Ah.....I was in a place as dark as this a long, long time ago. It was outside the city, in a nest of filth monsters. I wasn't a Heaven's Blade successor yet, still quite a kid. I had undergone training without using my vision, so I wasn't worried in the fight. I just fought like I was in a dream."

Layfon and other people fought the larvae in the nest that the Psychokinesists had found.

"The feeling during the fight was good, since I didn't have to think. I just needed to move according to my memories, but it was different after the fight."

The underground nest was made for the newly born larvae. Unable to sustain the intense fight, the exit had collapsed, sealing the Military Artists in there, including Layfon.

"I knew we'd be rescued because we had the flakes of the Psychokinesists with us, but I felt uneasy in the dark. So I understand your feelings."

"Sorry....."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Because..... You were going to find the exit."

"They'll find it quickly. There's someone who is better at this than I am."

"Yes, so....."

"So, I was scared back then."

"Huh?"

"I exhausted all my strength during the fight, but after everything had ended....."

He had nothing else to do. And he hated that feeling. The feeling of waiting for someone to do something.

"Layton.....Layton!"

".....Uh? What?"

"..... Uh."

He understood when Meishen turned her head and he heard her hair brushing against the uniform he had covered her with.

(As I thought.....)

The feeling of spacing out didn't sit well with him because it led his thinking into the negative. In this place where light failed to reach, the smell of metal and the surrounding environment had stolen away their body warmth. The coldness of the place took away their strength. The same as the situation before. The feeling was similar to the cruel time when the orphanage was poor and they couldn't do anything about it. He felt he had to do something, but deeper thought revealed his impotence.

"Layton..... Are you ok? Aren't you cold?"

"Thanks. I'm all right," he replied shortly and wrapped his knees with his arms.

"What do you mean it's all right!" A heated voice cut through the coldness. Felli.

"Great. You found us."

The sudden violent voice scared Meishen, and she tightened her hold on Layfon. He gave a relieved and exhausted smile.

"Huh?" It was Meishen's voice, shocked. She took her hand away from his shoulder as if to confirm something.

"Of course." Anger shot through Felli's light reply. Layfon shrugged.

"The Captain and the others are coming. You stay there and don't move."

'Wait for a bit,' Felli had said. In her words were impatience and anxiety.

"Layton.....?"

But it was already too late. Meishen confirmed that sticky feeling on her hand. "Lay.....ton."

She called his name repeatedly, her voice filled with tension and edginess. Layfon heard the sound of blood leaking rapidly from his body. His consciousness felt far away.

"Layton!"

Darkness swallowed him.

Leerin woke up and looked at her watch. She sat up on the bed, doubtful of the time her watch showed and then realized she hadn't changed into her pajamas. The window blinds remained closed from before she went to school. She opened it and saw the night street. The sun hadn't risen yet. As she spaced out, she remembered what happened yesterday. She was eating fried bread with Synola in the park and had told her about her feelings. The reason behind the chat was to seek advice and to organize and

objectively examine herself. She began to get flustered as bit by bit, she realized she already knew what she wanted from the very beginning.

"There's someone I want to see."

She had said that without reserve. That was what she wanted. Her worry came from her uncertainty of how he would think of her when he saw her.

But no matter how much you worry, you won't know the answer. Only the current Layfon in Zuellni can answer you. You gain nothing by worrying.

That was what Synola had told her.

"It is impossible to find what isn't in your heart," Synola said as she rolled up the bag of fried bread. The constant smile on her face had disappeared. Staring at the park, her eyes were surprisingly serious, but it was clear she wasn't looking at anything in particular.

"You'll only be wasting your effort seeking for that thing," she continued.

Leerin thought Synola had become someone else. She wasn't the strange senpai that Leerin had known. She had become a beautiful creature of something different.

"It's simple to give up what you can't have. Humans can even give up their lives easily. Humans have the habit of abandoning

things. What is before you can, in one split second, become a beautiful memory. It's also simple to live by loving your memory. Leerin, it's all right if you want to do that." Her words were cold and harsh. "But we can give up anytime. You hate getting hurt, but that feeling of dislike and hate can happen anywhere. Even if one wishes not to die, one might die on the day of his wish. Even so, it's easy for anyone to give up. Why do you think so?"

Leerin had a bad feeling as she listened. She felt that she didn't want to hear more. But Synola showed no signs of stopping. " Leerin, you just don't want to get hurt. That's all."

"!"

She wanted to deny it, but nothing came to her. She couldn't even shout. Swallowing back the words that weren't words, Leerin exhaled.

"It's not wrong to be afraid of getting hurt. But it's true that what can't be hurt might not be beautiful. No matter how beautiful a gem is, it began at its birth as a dirty stone. Nothing will happen if that stone isn't cut. No one knew what it would become before it was cut. But I believe it'll become something much more beautiful than when it was still dirty."

Having said that, Synola left the park, leaving Leerin rooted on the spot. Leerin had then returned to the dormitory and went to bed without changing. Perhaps what she had needed then was sleep. Synola's words had given a direction to the thought in her heart.

Leerin was surprised the next day that she had slept from dusk till dawn, as if she could only sleep to accept that change. She slept a lot but did not feel tired from waking. Her body was surprisingly light.

"Let's go," she said to herself and closed the blinds. She took off her clothes in the dark and went for a shower. She washed away all that stuck to her and refreshed herself once more.

When he came to, he was on a hospital bed, looking at a nurse's face. The nurse quickly called the doctor over to check on him.

"The person who came to the hospital the most this year is you," the senior doctor said with a weary face.

"I suppose." Layfon's gaze turned to the drip connected to his arm.

The main injuries were on his forehead, right shoulder and back . He sustained many other smaller wounds, but those three wounds were the main reason behind his blood loss and loss of consciousness.

"The biggest problem is the back. The debris had cut into a part of your spine. You have to go through an operation, but....." he paused.

"Will there be any side effects?"

"No. Even if the operation failed, we could restore your spine with the restoration operation. As long as your brain and Kei vein aren't damaged, pretty much your entire body can heal if we transport you to a hospital with good equipment before death. That's the level modern medicine is capable of. It'd be easier to just get you a new spine," the doctor said frankly.

"Then.....?"

"If we change your spine, you'll need time to recover. Taking out the debris needs less recovery time..... but you can't participate in the next platoon match."

"Aaah..... I see."

"Aren't you shocked?"

"This is the second time."

The 17th platoon had lost their match before when Nina had fainted and they lost by default.

"But I feel bad because it's my fault."

"That wasn't your fault. It was just the situation."

The situation.....It was caused by the wearing out of the part under the city, causing the ground to collapse.....That kind of thing. A detailed investigation was still being carried out, but that would probably be the conclusion. The doctor and all senior students of the construction course were told of the investigation.

"Just take a good rest now. A patient's job is to recover," the doctor hung the stethoscope back on his neck and left the room.

Nina came in, brushing past the doctor's shoulder.

"Are you all right?"

Appropriate to the situation of entering a hospital, Nina held a bunch of flowers.

"Sorry, I can't participate in the next match."

"Stupid, don't worry about that," she put the flowers aside and sat on the chair closest to the bed. It had been three days from the night when Nina knew of the date for the camp to when Layfon fell and lost his consciousness. Felli had quickly found him and Meishen, and the team had rescued them.

"Didn't you say that before? Now it's real."

"I see."

But the purpose of the camp was to prepare for the match with the 1st platoon. It felt like the 17th platoon had finally revived, and this incident happened on the worst timing possible.

"We haven't given up the match."

"Huh?"

"The training you gave us won't be wasted. I've become stronger. I think it's a shame if we forfeit the match. I've talked with the others, they all say we can't forfeit now."

"Is that so, that's good."

"So I say, you just concentrate on recovering."

Layfon nodded at her encouragement.

"Mei..... Is Meishen all right?"

He felt cramps from his muscles wrapped in bandages, and in his head surfaced Meishen. He couldn't quite move his head when the doctor was checking up on him.

"She's all right. Didn't get hurt much, just a scratch."

"..... That's great," he said, truly relieved.

"I'm sorry. That was my fault," Nina lowered her head.

"Not at all. It wasn't senpai's fault."

"But....."

"Nobody could have predicted it," he joked.

"Well..... I guess." Unable to accept that fact, she glanced at the flowers. Layfon's gaze followed hers for a short moment, then returned to Nina. A question rose in him as she continued to look at the flowers.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Huh? What?"

"Uh..... Just a feeling."

"Nothing. You're mistaken."

"If so, that's good."

"What a strange guy," Nina smiled. Looking at her smile, he couldn't help but feel that she was worried about something.

"Speaking of that, what about you?"

"Huh?"

"Your face tells me you're thinking of something."

"No.... Nothing."

"Don't lie. You're hiding something."

She moved herself to the end of the bed and bent close to his face. Layfon had his arm attached to a drip so he couldn't evade her.

"I'm not hiding anything. Really."

"Really?"

"Really."

Her face tensed up as it came closer to Layfon's. Her air weakened for a split second. It was just a split second but Layfon was sure of it. She saw him notice her change of expression, and she turned her gaze away from him as if she didn't care.

"You're too close," she said.

"Huh? Is that my fault?"

"Yes. That confusing face of yours."

Nina didn't move away.

"......But."

"But.....? What?" Layfon asked.

"I feel a little bit lonely."

"Lonely?"

"Uh.....Can you just pretend you didn't hear my last sentence?"

"Of course not."

She turned her face to him again. Under her imposing gaze, Layfon said "I lose."

"To think that I can't do anything even though I'm here....." he said.

"Stupid," she mumbled. "It's not what you can do but what you do.....Isn't it a given in your situation?" Her gaze fled from him again. She blushed.

Felli arrived a short time after Nina had left.

"Are you stupid?"

"Wa, is that what you say the moment you step through the door?"

"It's not a problem."

She was obviously angry. Even so, she looked at Nina's flower vase and compared it to the flowers in her hand, then she placed the flowers in the flask in the washroom.

"If you had lost more blood, you'd have died."

"Sorry."

Felli glared at him. Layfon felt himself becoming small before her.

"Since it was you, couldn't you have done better?"

"That was my limit. I had to protect another person so I couldn't use my full strength. It was difficult to handle the remnants of Kei. "

"So that's why you sustained severe injuries?"

"I'm far from being good."

"That's all?"

"Huh?"

"......Nothing. Do you know what's happening with the next match?"

"Ah, the Captain just came over and told me."

"Yes? The Captain..... truanted and came over?"

Layfon looked for the clock hanging on the wall. The time showed it was sunset. Nina didn't check her watch when she visited so she didn't know the time. It did feel that the time she visited was during class hours.

"Ah, true."

"..... Your relationship's getting better."

"Ehh?"

"That the captain would actually truant..... I don't think she knew you'd regain consciousness at this time. I only heard of it after school. I was really worried."

"Ah..... Perhaps."

"Layfon, you do whatever she says..... What a good relationship ."

"..... Are you mad, Felli-senpai?"

"....." she glared at him.

"Felli," he said quickly.

"I'm not mad. I'm just calmly analyzing the situation."

"Ha, haha....."

"You told them about Grendan," she suddenly changed the topic.

"Huh? Ah. Yes," he nodded anxiously.

"What's the point of letting them know?"

"Rather than having a point.....I didn't feel I could keep it a secret anymore....."

"Then, since you can't keep it a secret, you'll tell everyone about your past?"

"Well....." Probably not. Karian wouldn't want anyone to know of Layfon's past either.

"You.....think too little about yourself."

"Huh?"

"Meishen Trinden, Naruki Gelni, Mifi Rotten.....Naruki Gelni's all right, but the other two are just normal people. They cannot objectively understand the abilities of Military Artists. They know they can't do anything if a Military Artist attacked them. Is it all right to so easily tell them your past?"

"....."

"Didn't you think of the possibility that something could happen?"

"I did."

If Meishen, Mifi and Naruki left him.....Of course he thought of that. The worst situation was a repeat of his experience in Grendan. He hadn't thought of anything else except for that situation, and if that situation arose, Layfon would have to leave Zuellni no matter how much Karian needed him.

"If I asked them not to ask about my past, I'm sure they'd keep their word."

"Then you should have done that."

"But I didn't think I should leave things like that. They wanted to know more about me. They weren't planning something bad, so. ....."

"You want to be trusted?"

"Probably."

"About that, it might be a problem coming from me who knows of your past.....Geez, so you wouldn't be trusted if you didn't tell them?"

"Huh?"

"I'm using an analogy. You know why I came to the Academy City, don't you, Fon Fon?"

"Yes."

Felli was born a genius in Psychokinesis. Everyone had high expectations of her. But doubt flowered in her of her predestined role to become a Psychokinesist, so she came to Zuellni in search of another path. However, what awaited her in Zuellni was a city that had been defeated in past Military Arts Competitions, with students who didn't have good marks in Military Arts. Karian, as Student President of the city, knew of Felli's ability. And that was another unfortunate thing.

"But Fon Fon didn't know why I thought so. Weren't you suspicious of me? And if I didn't tell you, then you wouldn't have trusted me?"

"N.....Not at all."

"But perhaps I lied?"

"Huh?"

"Perhaps I lied because I wanted you to ease off your suspicion against my brother."

That was possible since Layfon's strength was worth the lie. But .

"You're lying," he said curtly.

"Why?"

"Because Felli's face is stiffer than usual."

"Huh?" she touched her face in a fluster, and that act alone had exposed her lie. Layfon didn't think by copying Leerin's method, it actually worked.

Noticing how he looked relieved, Felli glared at him. "Fon Fon... ..."

"Sorry," he lowered his head. "As you said, perhaps it was better if I didn't say anything and remained alone. But I already told them.....Although I might have kept it a secret if they didn't know. "

In truth, the girls connected the term Heaven's Blade successor with Layfon when they heard of it.

"Even so, I can't keep hiding it."

"You really are an idiot."

"Am I?"

"Yes," she decided. For some reason, the atmosphere between them had turned into the best. Probably because they had returned to the feeling they used to have.

"..... Do you want to know about my past, Layfon?"

"Yeah. I think there're many things about Felli that I don't know, but I don't know which part it is that I'm not aware of, so it's difficult....."

"I hate talking from the time of my birth."

"Same here."

"You still want to listen?"

"Yes, if it's you telling me."

Layfon finally felt at ease as the atmosphere turned back to normal between them.

At the same time, Sharnid stood at the entrance of a certain building in the area where Layfon was. Ambulances stood at that entrance, and there were other vehicles used to transport cargoes.

They were all vehicles that anyone hardly saw in Zuellni. They stood out on the ground where usually trams trended.

Sharnid was leaning against one of the pillars supporting the ceiling. He looked casually at the red and white vehicles to kill some time. The person he was waiting for finally appeared.

"Um," the person frowned.

"Yo," Sharnid raised his hand happily.

"What is it?"

"Is Dinn fine?"

"......He's still unconscious."

"Oh."

It was Dalshena, a beauty with rich golden curls. Her sharp gaze pierced Sharnid.

"Aren't you going to see him?"

"I did already. Well, I don't think I'll be forgiven."

"Then..... Why are you here?"

She remembered what happened a few days ago. "I see..... I heard someone from your team was hurt in that incident."

"We aren't as keen now."

News of the accident had quickly spread throughout the city. That might be due to the person who was injured in the incident. It looked like Dalshena really had no idea who was injured.

"The 10th platoon is disbanded. It's got nothing to do with me now." The coldness in her words wasn't aimed at Sharnid. "We deserved it. Your team just happened to take the role of executioner."

She knew a long time ago of Dinn's dealings in the illegal drug trade. She had a strong sense of justice, yet she failed to do anything to stop him. Her confusion disappeared along with Dinn's leaving, but she remained listless as before.

"Our trump card got injured."

"That first year student?"

"Exactly."

"How unfortunate."

"Yes."

The conversation went on smoothly, but Dalshena was looking at the scenery behind Sharnid, and Sharnid was looking at the ambulance. They treated each other as part of the scenery and continued the conversation.

"So you came to visit? Somehow I don't think so."

"I can visit tomorrow, now that we're immersed in the beautiful scenery around us."

"You need something from me? If it's a date, I refuse. But it's probably useless to tell you that. You never know when to give up. "

"Haha, not bad. I'm about to break the three digit count."

"Don't count. So you really need something from me?"

"Yes."

Displeasure showed on her face. "Don't tell me you want me to replace the injured first year?"

"I don't think that's bad. And not as replacement, but as a new member. We're still short of people."

"I refuse."

His expression stayed the same despite the quick rejection.

"'A Military Artist is a Military Artist. So you work hard to protect the existence of this city'," he quoted.

That stopped her from leaving.

"Did that come from a certain magazine? What a good saying. Who said such a thing?"

"You."

"What?" she said.

"You don't remember? Well, it's been a while, so you probably don't remember it."

"Um....."

"Remember it now?"

Layfon's classmate, Mifi, once did an interview with the 17th platoon. She also went to see the 10th platoon on the day of the interview. What Sharnid quoted was what Dalshena said for Mifi's magazine.

"Aaah, I did. So what?"

"Aren't you trying hard for Zuellin's sake?"

".....I can do that even without entering a platoon."

"Don't you already know what you can do by not entering a platoon?"

"Well.....I'm still not mature enough."

It was the time of the last Military Arts Competition when Sharnid and Dalshena were in their second year. They hadn't entered a platoon back then, and they fought as soldiers of the lower ranks, during Zuellni's defeat.

"Perhaps, but are you satisfied to fight against those immature guys?"

"You're provoking me with pride and a mission, but I don't plan to do what you're thinking. The important thing is that I can't fight with you anymore. The relationship of us three is broken. That's a reality we can't deny."

"I know that."

When Sharnid was still with the 10th platoon, people called him , Dalshena and Dinn the strongest of Zuellni. This was shattered when Sharnid left, and the ranking of the 10th platoon plummeted. In order to boost the strength of the 10th platoon and make it as good as it was before, Dinn plunged his hand into the illegal drug trade and ended up getting his team disbanded.

"But I didn't call out to you because I want us to work as before. We can't be like before now that Dinn's not with us. I don't anticipate that kind of thing," he said honestly. "The person we need now is someone called Dalshena Che Matelna. You're not replacing Layfon. Of course, we need an attacker because Layfon can't enter the next match, but that's not only it. We need to increase our strength for the next Military Arts Competition. That's why we need you, Shena."

He pushed himself off the pillar and looked at her. "If Dinn were here, and I wasn't.....What'd Shena look like without us? That, I think, would not be bad to see."

"....."

"Well, if you think otherwise, come to the Training Complex," he didn't wait for her reply and brushed past her to leave the hospital.

"Wait....."

He stopped.

"....Why did you go to the 17th platoon, no, accept Nina Antalk's invitation?"

"....Though I broke our relationship, there's something important to me."

"What?"

"It's useless to stand around and grumble....Isn't that right?"

"You always never speak clearly of what's important."

"Haha," he laughed and resumed walking. He didn't stop this time.

"Ah, still full of spirit?" A cheerful greeting.

"I'm still a patient like usual," he greeted casually. Observing as a side party, Myunfa felt herself getting smaller.

"Really? Though all I heard was the recovery of basic functions. Several of your ribs and internal organs were injured, right? It's not strange for a Military Artist to recover quickly from that." The person handed the bunch of flowers to the female student behind him. He glanced at the student preparing the vase, and went to stand near the bed, smiling.

"Well, I've always been sick since I was little. I get sick once my strength drops," the red haired person deliberately coughed on the bed.

"I see. That's been hard on you."

"Exactly, because of that, the doctor won't dismiss me from the hospital."

That didn't feel like something that a patient lying on a hospital bed should say, but the visitor didn't point that out. The visitor's name was Karian Loss, and the person on the bed was Haia Salinvan Laia. Karian was the Student President who made all the important decisions in Zuellni. He came to visit the leader of the Mercenary Gang.

"I'm very grateful for the Student President to visit me. So please take your time."

"Thanks for your invitation, but I didn't plan to. There are many problems I still have to manage."

"Ha, as expected of the Student President. You're so busy."

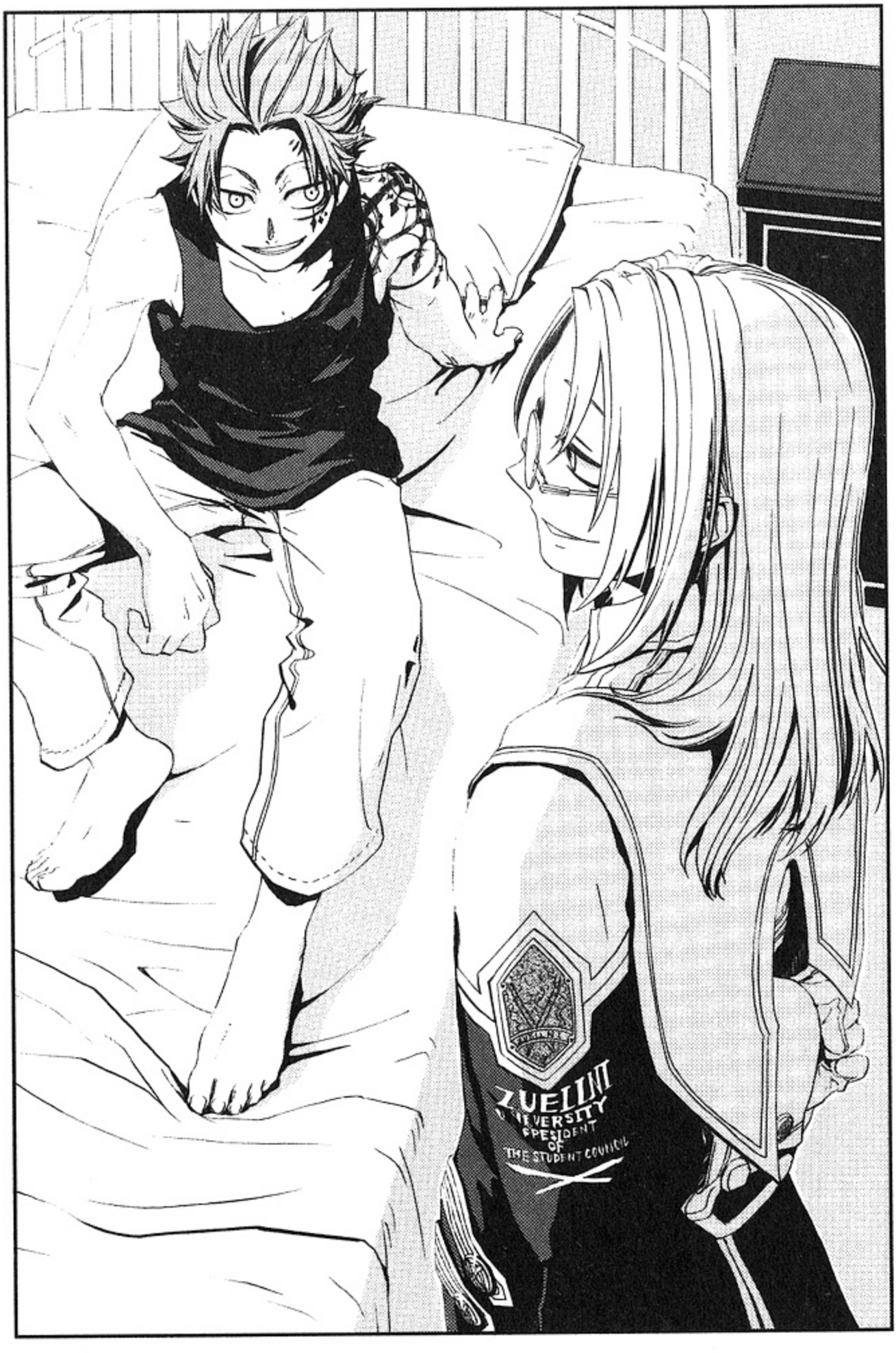
"Yes, like discovering that part of the foundations of Zuellni had weakened, and how our most important trump card is injured. Problems are piling up."

The smile in Karian's eyes disappeared. On the contrary, Haia's fearless smile deepened.

"Let me make it clear that I didn't do anything."

"I believe you. We've been partners, so it'd be good if there's friendship and trust between us."

"Friendship is very important."


ZUELUNI
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PRESIDENT
OF
THE STUDENT COUNCIL

"True."

Laughter sounded between them. Their words conveyed warmth yet their expressions showed anything but trust. Myunfa trembled in that icy atmosphere.

"As proof of our friendship, I have some information for you."

"Oh, then I thank you.....but could this be a parting gift? Your subordinates at the dormitory seem to be making some sort of preparations."

"How could they? I'm injured and in the hospital. They can't leave."

"True. Sorry for that. Your subordinates admire you very much. Then?"

"The Haikizoku. It's not good to leave it alone for so long."

"Oh, why?"

"No matter how powerful it is, it's gone through the time of destruction. If it hasn't got something to support it, it'll continue to spread destruction. That's the kind of thing it is. You should listen to me."

Karian frowned. Could this have something to do with the incident a few days ago?

"I see. Seems we can't just leave it."

"You can't do anything but hand it to us."

"......Does that mean Grendan's Queen knows how to take care of it?"

"How would I know something that detailed? I wasn't born in Grendan. I haven't even seen the Queen's face."

"Um.....Speaking of which, you have quite the ambition to be a Heaven's Blade successor."

"I spoke too much."

"Oh ha, how much information do you have?" Karian smiled.

Haia returned his smile. "I like people with good memories."

"Same here."

"Geez.....We match well," Haia laughed and told him another piece of information. Karian's expression went stiff as Haia watched him cheerfully.

The recent atmosphere felt strange. Was it just her own feelings? Nina watched the people at the Mechanical Department.

She was cleaning the designated area on her own. She didn't have someone to talk to because Layfon was in the hospital. Nobody was fast enough to match the cleaning speed of Nina and Layfon, so no one would clean with her. Usually, the other people cleaning here were normal people. It was rare for Military Artists to take up this job.

"Fu....." she breathed out and glanced up. The maze of corridors surrounded the center of the Mechanical Department.

"Was it my imagination?"

In recent days, she heard some other noise besides the noises from the workings of mechanisms. People were investigating the Mechanical Department because of the collapse of the ground. Was this the cause of that noise? Nina didn't have the confidence in her own feelings. Unable to calm down, irritation rose in her. She felt as if the noise was overtaking her being. If she could talk to someone, she'd feel more relieved, but.....

No one was around her. Layfon was in the hospital. Before Layfon arrived, Nina used to clean on her own for the sake of efficiency. Even if there were people around, they were those who ran around for errands.

They seemed..... busy?

"Nina!" A senior student called. Nina turned.

"Could it be....."

"Could it be exactly. I'm counting on ya," the senior student with a beard said and left running.

Zuellni had run off again. It was normal for the workers to be busy, but today was different.

"Right, so that's why they're....."

Why hadn't she realized?

Nina put down the broom to find Zuellni.

(As I thought, is it because of Layfon?)

At that time, Nina and the others were waiting at the camp for Layfon and the girls to return. The night had deepened. There weren't many dangerous things in the production area. Felli had left camp to follow the girls and Layfon. Nina wasn't too worried because it was highly unlikely for them to get lost in the dark. One possible danger could be animals that had escaped from the ranch and turned wild, but they didn't have those animals here in Zuellni. Besides, it should be all right with Layfon and Naruki there. Who would have thought that a huge hole would appear in the ground?

The intense shaking of the ground hit the camp where Nina was . She thought Zuellni had stumbled across another filth monster's

nest. But then she heard the truth from Felli, a truth more shocking than a filth monster attack. She felt as if her blood had been sucked dry, and her feet couldn't help but shake. She had never experienced something as horrible as this, and something this unusual had happened to Layfon.

(Are you not going to stop messing up that guy's life?)

Layfon came to Zuellni to start a new life.

(Yes.....)

He wanted to live like a normal person. He gave up the benefits that a Military Artist would receive, and planned to live a normal life. That was what he wanted. Of course, a Military Artist wouldn't just accept his benefits. He had to stand in the front line when the city faced a crisis. He had to fight filth monsters and fight in the Military Arts Competition to win a selenium mine for Zuellni. He had to bet on his life and fight for the city. And that was what made a Military Artist a Military Artist.

Layfon wasn't escaping from danger. In fact, he chose to fight alone when he met such a situation.

(Am I the one who stopped him from living a new life.....?)

It was unfortunate that Karian knew of Layfon's past, and Nina had underestimated the impact of Karian's knowledge. Layfon worked hard because he was asked to. He had sustained damage to his body because of that. He had said that he'd fight with them. But that couldn't hide his outstanding strength. Of course, he

played a huge role in deciding how the 17th platoon worked in a match.

(What was I thinking back then.....?)

Nina and Sharnid went out to help once they heard from Felli. Seeing the blood-covered Layfon, she wondered whether her own heart had stopped beating. After recovering from the shock.....

(What was I thinking.....?)

She was thinking of the next match. The doctor had said that Layfon couldn't participate. The only front line attacker had retired . That wasn't the only truth. The 17th platoon had lost its entire function.

(That's not it.)

There were many other ways to fight. Sharnid had volunteered to find someone to replace Layfon, but there were ways even if they couldn't find another person. Nina and Sharnid could reinforce Naruki when the team was on the offensive side. They might not even need to make any changes if the team played the defensive role. Nina couldn't guarantee victory, but she felt that the team wasn't doing too bad for now.

(That's right. But why.....)

At that time, she felt everything had ended. The torch in her hand illuminated a bloody Layfon. His eyes were closed. She did feel that everything had ended, including her thoughts and hope.

She once said to him to "do something". A strong and determined declaration that was in fact weak and soft.

"How useless I am."

The situation became her relying on him. She had accepted the fact that his strength as a Military Artist far exceeded hers. At the beginning, she had wanted to learn from him and make herself stronger.....

"Damn....."

The shock of seeing Layfon covered in blood still remained in her. She couldn't look him in the eyes when she visited because that image was with her.

"I can't be like that....."

Probably because she had been thinking while walking, when she looked around, she didn't know where she was. Probably somewhere close to the center of the Mechanical Department. A place like a small hill, surrounded by metal plates. What was inside? The Electronic Fairy. But what was the Electronic Fairy doing in there? Nobody knew what made a city move. What Military Artists and the workers came into contact with were the tubes, corridors and wires that stretched out from the center. How did Zuellni turn the mine into liquid form, how did the city detect the filth monsters..... There were many, many things that people didn't know.

"Geez..... Where is this place?"

As if to keep her spirit up, she called and looked around.

"Zuellni!"

Too many things were blocking her sight. She didn't know where she was. Nina raised her voice again. Her voice echoed among various noises.

When her voice faded, a ball of light flew to her through the gaps between tubes. The form of a small girl occupied the middle of that light. The city's Electronic Fairy half flew and half staggered into Nina's arms. Zuellni weighed nothing.

"You aren't being good," Nina scolded. Zuellni made a happy expression that made her want to forgive her.

"What're you doing for today?" Nina asked and patted Zuellni's hair.

Zuellni had her head on Nina's shoulder, but she suddenly flew from Nina's arms to sit on her shoulders. She hugged Nina's head and put her chin on her head. Zuellni pulled Nina's hair.

"Uh? Over there?" she turned to look at the direction Zuellni was indicating.

"There's nothing there?" she gazed in Zuellni's direction and only saw tubes and corridors.

"What is it that makes you so happy?"

Zuellni didn't respond.

"Zuellni?"

The tiny Electronic Fairy kept staring in that direction.

"....."

The Zuellni now reminded Nina of an anxiety she once felt. She couldn't tell whether it was unease, tension or excitement. She watched Zuellni's direction in silence.

Chapter 4: Hold hands while blindfolded

It had been a week since Layfon regained consciousness. Most of his injuries had been healed, but the doctor hadn't yet given him permission to leave the hospital.

Naruki arrived while Layfon didn't know how to pass his time.

"Yo..... How are you?" she said.

"I can't stand the boredom," he said weakly.

Naruki smiled in relief at his voice. She had also sustained injuries, but they were less severe. She had already recovered.

"Still haven't had the operation yet?"

Most of Layfon's external wounds had recovered, but the spinal injury had been left untouched. Caution was required to take out the debris embedded deep inside the spinal cord. The medical team in charge of the operation was having a preparatory meeting over it. Next would come the operation, and Layfon would be discharged if the operation was successful.

"I hope it comes quickly."

He couldn't stand the boredom and the numerous medical checks on him. It felt like he had become an experimental object.

"This is better than undergoing a failed operation. Have more patience."

"..... Mei, is she still blaming herself?"

"Aaah....." Naruki lowered her head.

"She really doesn't have to do that....."

Naruki said that Meishen was blaming herself over the incident and had locked herself in her room. She hadn't even come to the hospital for a visit.

"At least she's going to school now."

"Sorry, it was my fault."

"I told you before that it wasn't your fault. We chose that place. You were just following us."

"But it turned out like this because I was hiding something....."

"Layton....." Her gesture stopped him from saying more.

"Even we have a few things we don't want others to know. We aren't like Layton because our reasons for hiding them are different, but there are bound to be a few secrets. I don't think we have to blame ourselves because of that."

"Naruki....."

"I'm happy. The fact that you can tell us about such a heavy past , isn't that proof of the trust between us?"

"Uh....."

"That's enough. But I hope you can wait for Mei. She's confused because you got injured. Can you give her some time?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

After exchanging an awkward smile, they changed the topic to the 17th platoon.

"Dalshena-senpai joined as your substitute."

"Really?"

"Aaah, Sharnid-senpai invited her."

Layfon thought it would be difficult to invite Dalshena, taking into consideration the previous incident with the 10th platoon. Naruki thought so too.

"I'm bothered but it's a sensitive topic. Since the Captain has agreed to it, I can't say much about it."

"If you had a better relationship with Sharnid-senpai, then it would be easier."

"Well..... That's not easy."

"Huh?"

"Anyway, what should be done should be done. It'd be good if you could be discharged soon, otherwise it would be meaningless for me to have entered the platoon."

"......Naruki, what do you think of what I did?"

"Other people's opinions don't matter to Layton, do they?"

"Uh..... well."

"I'm joking..... You're right. My sense of morality feels that what Layton did was wrong. It was wrong, but I don't hate you because of it. What's important is that it was in the past. It's not totally cut off from the present Layton, but I can't say much about it since I wasn't involved."

"Sorry. I asked something strange."

"It's ok. We were the ones who asked you about it, and I hadn't told you my thoughts on it yet."

"Yeah."

"Layton..... What you did was a crime, but you were already punished for it. I don't think it's something you can tell anyone easily, so don't worry too much about it. But you're letting go of it, right?"

"......Letting go?"

"Seems a Katana was involved with the fight against the Mercenary Gang? You had two Dites. The Dite you used against Dinn was in the form of a Katana."

"....."

Originally, Layfon had been training in the Psyharden's Katana skill, taught by his adopted father, Derek. It wasn't a sword skill. However, Layfon chose to fight with a sword when he became a Heaven's Blade successor.

"Didn't you say before that you don't think what you did in Grendan was wrong? But you've restricted yourself to some sort of a constraint? That's not because of the crime, but because of your sense of guilt. I think you just need to let go and release yourself from it."

Layfon didn't think it was wrong to participate in the underground matches, but it was unforgivable in Derek's views. If he used the Psyharden skills, then he'd have tainted Derek's reputation. The only solution was for him to stop using the Katana. The difference between using a sword and a Katana was delicately decisive. He was able to use the sword when he was a Heaven's Blade successor because of his ability to understand and use any techniques by glancing at them, and because of the support from the Steel Thread techniques that he learned from Lintence.

"That's all I have to say. Layton's the one to decide in the end."

(Letting.....go?)

He knew from Naruki's opinion that it wasn't easy to let go, still , he was hesitant.

Someone knocked on the door.

The day of the match had come. The audience was more enthusiastic than usual. All of the platoons would have fought each other at least once after this match. They would also have their results compared. The results would directly impact their ordering in the next Military Arts Competition. Nevertheless, all the audience wanted to know was which platoon was the strongest . In particular, today's match would decide whether the 1st platoon could maintain its top position. As such, everyone in the audience seat kept their gazes on the war field.

"Well.....it's got nothing to do with us," Sharnid happily said in the locker room.

The three teams fighting for the first position were Vance's 1st platoon, Gorneo's 5th platoon, and the 14th platoon. All three teams had only lost one match. The 17th platoon was right after them, with two defeats under its belt. The 17th platoon's opponent was the 1st platoon today. The other two teams were also having their match today with each other. If the 17th platoon won the

match, first place would still go to the 5th or the 14th platoon. If team 17 lost, the 1st platoon would take top position, tied with the winning team of the other match.

"We still need to give it our best despite that," Nina glared at him.

"Yes, yes," Sharnid shrugged.

"Even though we can't take the top position, we'll still do our best..... No, we must still win!"

Because the platoon wasn't in its best condition..... Because whether they won or not they couldn't take the first place..... These things mattered not. There was a higher meaning if they defeated the 1st platoon. Naruki's friends held an interview before with the platoons. Gorneo, the captain of the 5th platoon, had said in the interview that if they couldn't win against the 1st platoon, then Zuellni wouldn't have changed from the time when it lost in the last Military Arts Competition. Nina thought so too. And more significantly, she didn't want to think that it was impossible to find a replacement for Layfon. It was also for Layfon, since Nina had said to "do something", so she had to do something for him to see how they had become stronger.

"I know," Sharnid said, waving his hand weakly as if Nina's words were wind to him. She glared at him then turned her gaze to Dalshena. Dalshena sat with her eyes closed.

"The attacker is..... the Captain?" Dalshena asked, keeping her pose. Everyone's gaze went to Nina except Felli's.

"Naruki and I will go up the left rear. Dalshena, please take the right rear. Sharnid will fire from a distance with Felli's support. That'll be our formation once the match begins," Nina said. She swallowed and waited for their reaction.

"This time we're on the offensive. We lose if the Captain falls. Is this ok?" Dalshena asked as Nina had expected. She knew she would point out the danger of having the captain take the front attacker position. In truth, Nina wasn't sure where to put Dalshena . She did check Dalshena's fighting style through the videos, but that was all within the formation of the 10th platoon. Nina didn't know how Dalshena fought on her own. The 10th platoon had taken advantage of Dalshena's excellent offensive skills. Nina had thought of using a similar strategy, but it would be difficult because they didn't have enough time to train together. And Dalshena also held the same worry.

"Please don't worry about me," she said. Layfon had taught her the Kongoukei. He said the Heaven's Blade successor, Reverse, used it as his defensive skill. She couldn't use it as well as the Heaven's Blade successor, but with it, she had the confidence to defend against heavy impacts.

"Then I just need to attack when the time comes?" Dalshena opened her eyes and looked at her.

"Yes."

"Roger."

She closed her eyes again and waited for the match to begin.

Having checked everyone's Dites, Harley came to Nina.

"It's Layfon's operation today. Is it finished?"

"Um? I don't know much about medicine."

Layfon's operation was today, an operation to take out the debris in his spinal cord.

"I hope it'll go smoothly."

"Yes."

They must not lose this match. If she continued to rely on Layfon and didn't move forward..... That was what she thought. And she wanted to show that she could do it without Layfon.

"We'll win," she said to herself.

Layfon was outside the hospital one hour before Nina's match. The operation didn't take long. The problem was where the debris was located in the spinal cord, and how to safely take it out. This had been talked over in the preparatory meeting, so all the doctors needed were to follow the decisions made in the meeting during

the operation. Fortunately, the debris was in an area where the debris could be taken out in one and not in several operations..... So one operation sufficed. The doctors had then sewed up the wound and stuck on it a wet pad filled with active cell medicine. The pain felt like a cramp, but with the aid of Internal Kei, the wound should close up and recover within a day. The thread used to sew up the wound would then melt and disappear. Layfon didn't even need to go back to the hospital and have the thread taken out. However, he couldn't do much about his reduced strength.

(I'm not at my full strength.)

He checked his body condition in a relaxed manner and headed for the closest tram station. This area was quieter today because of the inter-platoon match. A tram arrived right after Layfon had checked the timetable at the station.

"Ah....."

The tram slowed to a stop. The first half of the tram rolled past Layfon, and he saw a shocked Meishen standing at the exit of the tram. Since he couldn't escape, he entered the tram. Meishen stood at the exit with a bunch of flowers in her arm. The computer of the tram made an electronic sound as if urging something. Meishen stepped back from the door in a fluster.

The tram moved after the door had closed.

"Ah, Mei. Hello," Layfon smiled with embarrassment.

"......Layton, why?" Meishen asked, shocked.

"Ah, I was discharged."

"Huh? But.....But you have an operation....."

"Oh, it's finished."

"......Uh? But, the operation?"

"Yeah, it finished quicker than expected. I was surprised too."

Only the two of them were in the tram. They sat side by side. The scenery flowed outside the window opposite them. They sat in silence. Meishen put the light-colored flowers between them. Layfon had received flowers when he was in the hospital. Nina's was a deep color. Felli's was a color that softened the room. Naruki and Meishen's were of a pure color. Layfon thought Meishen's flowers seemed to represent herself.

The two of them looked at the flowers.

"About before..... I'm sorry," she said weakly.

"Uh.....Rather than that, I'm happy that Mei isn't injured."

"Me.....never mind."

"Never mind, but....."

"Layton.....You protected me," she cut in, her hands clutching her skirt as if she was using her entire strength to say those words.

".....Not only that, you also protected me when the filth monsters were here."

"Huh.....?"

"I heard about it from Naruki. Something like a secret weapon, but the Student President didn't say what it was. He just said it's changed. If Layton wasn't there....."

"Uh....."

".....Actually, Naruki said that too," she said, her head lowered. Her shoulders sagged as if losing strength.

".....I don't understand. Even though Layton's a Heaven's Blade successor, an incredible someone, I still don't understand. I know Military Artists are incredible, but I don't understand anything beyond that. Although I understand that you did something bad and was exiled from Grendan....." she fell silent.

Meishen was a normal person. In Grendan, people would understand the term Heaven's Blade successor even if it wasn't explained.

It was understandable that Meishen didn't comprehend the meaning of the term. Layfon hadn't fought seriously in the past inter-platoon matches. He had fought with a strength just a bit above a normal student's. The only times he used some of his true strength was when he fought in the matches against the 10th and the 5th platoons. Meishen and anyone else probably wouldn't understand the difference in Layfon's strength in those matches. In

addition, Meishen and the others wouldn't understand how Zuellni's Military Artists fought against filth monsters. They were in the shelters and couldn't see anything as the fight wasn't broadcasted.

(Aaah, I see.....)

He now understood the Queen's words on a deeper level. This was the thing that no one was to know – that Military Artists fought filth monsters using the strength they exhibited in matches. The strength of Heaven's Blade successors far exceeded the comprehension of normal people. Hence, Meishen couldn't accept what Naruki said, that Layfon defeated all the larvae.

"It was me," Layfon nodded.

"Really?" She didn't look convinced.

"Is it hard to believe?"

"Uh....."

"That was what happened. But it's ok if you think it's a lie."

"Wh, Why?"

"Because I can't find the proof for you."

Naruki might see the proof one day. She was a Military Artist. She had what a Military Artist possessed. Perhaps Layfon would be there when Zuellni once more fought filth monsters. He didn't think the same opportunity would present itself to Meishen.

Normal people would hide in a shelter when filth monsters attacked.

"Can't I trust you?"

"Huh?"

"I want to trust Layton."

Looking at her lowered head, this time Layfon had nothing to say. Although her words were within his predictions, the feelings he got when hearing them were unexpected. He had wanted her to believe him, but whether it would go smoothly was uncertain. Anyone else wouldn't have cared. To believe, to trust or not to trust mattered not.

"Th, thanks."

"I've thought of what Layton said. You decided to do that after considering many things, right?"

"Yeah....."

"I wasn't there. About those people who didn't treat you well.....I'm angry at them, and I'm also sad.....But, I don't understand them. I don't think I can judge them, but....."

When he realized it, Meishen's shoulders were trembling. Her tears darkened her skirt. She was crying.

"Mei....."

"Layton.....You've done well," she said as if she was moaning. " You did your best.....but they didn't understand you.....they're so mean."

"....."

Meishen meant the children at the orphanage. Words defending those kids flashed past Layfon's head. He swallowed them. It wasn't hatred. The feeling was like a defense but either way, they wouldn't forgive him.

If only he were hated.

He said that not long ago to Gorneo. He had the right to hate him. The closest person to Gorneo was Gahard. Gorneo had the right to hate Layfon, as Layfon had paralyzed Gahard. He hadn't the right to stop that hatred, which was the same with the children at the orphanage.

So,

"Thank you," came his heartfelt reply to Meishen, who was crying for him.

Thump, thump.....The sound of a pulse. Was this Zuellni's voice coming from the liquid flowing in the tubes? No. No. Zuellni denied that. The reason came from somewhere else. Speaking of which.....The Electronic Fairy Zuellni did not exist in a human's consciousness. A human's nervous system was too sensitive to be able to manage such a huge city. A human would scream horribly at every single thing. It wouldn't be able to manage the city. So this feeling didn't come from the city itself. What was it.....? The answer came from within the question. What was used as a hearing mechanism was limited only to a certain place. Where could it be besides that place?

Here.

The center of the Mechanical Department. In here. The place that existed for the city's entirety. The Electronic Fairy in the form of a child.....That was the city's consciousness. It pondered its feeling of looking at the city, and of managing its own body. Usually, it could clearly feel the boundaries, but now it couldn't remember that feeling and that puzzled Zuellni. But was that

really the sense of hearing? It also felt like touch, as if a pulse was shaking it. What was it, that feeling.....? Zuellni analyzed its feelings in order to seek the reason behind it, but no results surfaced. It was strange.

When Zuellni broke through its thoughts, it stared at that place. Its gaze pierced through the outer wall of the Mechanical Department, the outer wall of the city to somewhere far away. A place the city must go to.....Anxiety and impatience urged Zuellni on.

"Your stubbornness is really annoying," Kirik said coldly, sitting in a wheelchair.

"Sorry," Layfon said with his head lowered.

A "humph" came from Kirik, contrasting his unhappy attitude with his handsome face.

"I made it for you, but you said you're not gonna use it. This is too tragic."

Both of them looked at the Dites lying on the table. A big Dite in the shape of a stone, and a rod shaped Dite in a leather case. They

were the Adamantium Dite and its material. The Alchemy student Kirik, had combined the qualities and shapes of various combinations of materials to make the Adamantium Dite.

"This Dite can turn into sword, thread, gun, long sword, bow and staff, It can take several sword forms.....And according to your wish, I had eliminated the variation of a Katana."

"Yes."

"Really....."

Wearing protective gear for outside city use, Layfon listened to Kirik's explanation. He had returned to the dormitory to change his clothes and make his preparations. He now stood at the entrance underneath Zuellni. It was his third time here. The first time was when he had to fight the aged phase filth monster. The second time was when he went to investigate the ruined city. The first time he was alone when he came here. The second time he was with the 5th and the 17th platoons. This third time.....

"He, you're holding something interesting~" The new presence stood behind Layfon without hesitation. He frowned.

"This is confidential. Go away," Kirik glared at the newcomer.

"Yeah~" the owner of the presence..... Haia retreated. A number of bikes sat behind him, along with more than ten Military Artists. They were all his subordinates, Military Artists of the Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang.

Karian had come to the hospital room a day before the operation.

"Actually, the city's acting strange," he said after putting down the present and greeted Layfon politely.

"Strange?"

"Though the information came from the Mercenary Gang....."

Remembering Haia's face, Layfon's expression turned sour. Haia had been sent to the hospital after that match. He had already recovered but Layfon didn't hear anything of Haia leaving Zuellni.

"Aa, don't show that kind of a face. They're still useful."

"How.....Useful?"

"Their strength is needed when it comes to fighting filth monsters. And we have to leave the Haikizoku to them. Of course, that's besides using what they planned in the match."

Layfon didn't know whether there was an easy way to remove the Haikizoku, but he knew Karian was serious about the filth monsters' attack. Layfon understood after having seen the Military Artists of Zuellni fighting the larvae. They had no previous experience in that area. Grendan's Military Artists would have at least seen fights with filth monsters, but not here. As he thought, cities other than Grendan were more peaceful.

"Then....."

"Ah. Their.....Their Psychokinesist discovered some filth monsters in the path of the city."

"The path of the city?" That puzzled Layfon. If it was at a distance that a Psychokinesist could reach, then the city should have taken evasive action.

"It really is strange. At first I doubted it too. Of course, the Psychokinesist who discovered it was also doubtful of it. He delayed his report to Haia to spend a few days to observe."

Karian breathed in. The pupils behind his glasses were sharp.

"But the city didn't change its path. It still heads in the same direction, right where the filth monsters are."

"Felli.....Has your sister confirmed it?"

"Because it's quite a distance, it was quicker to send the drones out than the flakes. The result came back yesterday." He took out a bag and handed it to Layfon.

Layfon confirmed the content. He had done this before. As expected, the photos were like before, photos of the wild scenery outside the city. In those photos showed numerous things that he had encountered. The dormant filth monsters.

"Aa, right. Let me introduce them~" Haia said to Layfon, pointing

at the bikes and people behind himself. This was after Kirik had finished explaining and Layfon had buckled up the weapon harness around his waist.

"He's the Psychokinesist. He's my backup."

A tall man waited behind Haia. A hood covered his head and face, and a cape shrouded his body. A mask concealed his face. His hands were hidden in gloves. A piece of cloth wrapped around the head where the mask failed to cover, as if he was careful so not one inch of his skin was exposed.

(This person.....)

He was the Psychokinesist who found the filth monsters, the one who discovered the filth monsters earlier than anyone else, and he found them in a distance that required a drone to cover.....If that was true, then his Psychokinesis might even be more powerful than Felli's.

"This is Fermaus. His throat doesn't work so he has to talk through an electronic voice."

"Please look after me." An electronic voice, devoid of its gender origin, sounded above Layfon's head. A flake floated above him.

"He's a genius in Psychokinesis, but he also has other special abilities. Because of that, he's to dress like this."

"Special abilities?"

Layfon listened silently, suspicious of Haia's voluntary information. As of a kid who was so proud of something that he had to boast about it, but because it was a secret, Haia said in a low voice, "He can smell filth monsters."

"Smell?"

What? Smelling anything was out of the question once outside the air purification system. The pollutants were enough to blunt and conquer the senses of the entire body. The sense of smell was also paralyzed.

"You don't believe me. I can distinguish by smelling," Fermaus said. "Wolfstein.....You have killed countless filth monsters. I can tell by smelling the remnants of filth monsters left in your body. Other people won't get it, but I do. You've killed many more filth monsters than anyone here. It's my honor to be able to fight with you."

"Uh.....That name's already....."

"I see. Excuse me, Layfon-dono," Fermaus lifted his head carefully.

Layfon didn't feel any hatred and rudeness from him. Instead, Fermaus was respectful.

"Hey, hey. I was the one in trouble before. You don't have to use polite terms here."

"That was the leader's fault. Although obtaining a thing through any means is passed down from the first generation, this time Wolfstein's.....Excuse me, Layfon-dono's provocative action was unnecessary. If we had explained the danger of the Haikizoku to Layfon-dono, he'd have lent a helping hand. But we turned him into an enemy. If Ryuhou was alive, he'd call you a fool."

"Don't bring in the previous generation," Haia said with an annoyed expression.

"No, I have to."

The rest of the Mercenary Gang laughed cheerfully.

Layfon watched them with complicated feelings.

".....Well, it's useless to talk about the past."

"No, please forgive me~" Haia sat down.

"Compared to that, let's talk about me," Fermaus turned to Layfon. "I can smell filth monsters. This is by smelling the stirring in the air when pollutants are breathed in and stored. The dry wind outside the city is caused by the filth monsters' activities and their use of pollutants."

"Ha, Ah....." Even though Layfon had just listened to something grand about filth monsters being able to change the air, all he could do was stand dumbfounded.

"My sense of smell can find the pollutants used by filth monsters."

"But....." Layfon still didn't find Fermaus' words convincing. Even the filth monsters changing the atmosphere didn't feel real to him. It was too hard to comprehend without a basis. The thing was , Fermaus' words just weren't credible enough. Besides, what Layfon thought was most suspicious was.....

"I understand. But to smell the filth monsters, you have to go outside the air purification system."

"..... Yes," Fermaus slowly lifted his right hand. "People cannot live long under exposure to the pollutants. The body will burn, rot and collapse. My body can't escape that pain. And medical treatment isn't advanced enough to treat injuries of that kind if I'm exposed repeatedly to pollutants." His right hand took the chin of the mask. "But I have a special physique inside me. It might have been born from tolerance. I have a special physique that allows me to live even though I'm exposed to pollutants. If my body's examined, maybe we'll see the day when humans can overcome pollutants in the air."

Fermaus took down the mask. Layfon heard Kirik's swallow. He himself opened his mouth, but no words came forth.

"But the price might be to become someone like me," he said.

Fermaus' skin was dark as charcoal and ribboned with red veins . His nose had collapsed. His eyelids were gone. The white

eyeballs looked ready to fall out of their sockets. Dry lips cracked. Layfon could see his perfect white teeth that contrasted with his lips. This was a face of someone who could live through continuous exposure to pollutants, unable to receive any treatment because modern medicine wasn't advanced enough.

"Please believe in my sense of smell. Her Majesty also acknowledges it."

Fermaus put the mask back and bowed deeply to Layfon.

The whistle sounded in the war field. Besides the Psychokinesist, only four people in the 17th platoon were left to fight. The 1st platoon had six. However, the fighting power wasn't that unequal taking into consideration that the 1st platoon was leaving one or two people to defend their flag. In actuality, Felli's report showed the 1st platoon did leave two people for defense.

Nina and her team took action when the siren sounded. Nina took the left rear, followed by Naruki. The 17th platoon was on the offensive. The team would lose if Nina, as captain, was defeated. Showing this weakness was to attract the attacks over to Nina's side, and it worked. Vance had sent a number of good fighters to track her.

"Bad strategy....." Vance said, his huge body suddenly blocking her forward momentum. The staff spun in his hand, creating a storm of Kei. His other teammates gathered round and sealed off Nina's path.

"Bad strategy or not..... Talk of it later!" she roared and blocked the staff with the iron whips. Her foot sank into the ground under the impact of the assault. She used external Kei to bounce back the staff, and dove for Vance's front. The staff was a longer ranged weapon, so a close quarters fight would reduce its effectiveness. As expected, Vance's teammates moved as if to make Nina back off .

Naruki's rope shot in and wrapped around the sword of the Military Artist on Vance's right, stopping his movement. Still, they were two against one.....Still a disadvantage for Nina. Vance was a better fighter than her. He had had more experience as a senior student, having fought in the Military Arts Competition and numerous other inter-platoon matches. But Nina's fight with Vance was to draw the attention of the 1st platoon. The strategy to move forward for a decisive fight was to create an opening for Dalshena. She boldly swung her iron whips at Vance.

Vance fought her at close range, looking as if he was releasing his strength without holding back, and also looking as if he had become smaller for the fight. Chased away from Vance's front area, Nina attacked his teammates behind him. Body bent, she blocked a sword with her left iron whip and stood up. She heaved him over her shoulder in Vance's direction.

"Wa!"

Vance pulled close to Nina to avoid his teammate's body. He didn't look once at his team member. Using external Kei, Nina jumped backwards to retreat. Vance rushed in, his staff pointed forward to attack. Nina had the disadvantage as she was in midair.

In one moment, Vance's body seemed to shrink, retrieving the staff. And Nina then felt the speed of the staff that she failed to see. Her iron whips bounced off Vance's weapon, and a heavy impact landed on her chest. She was thrown into the air.

"Captain!"

The disappearance of Nina from her sight pulled Naruki's gaze over. In that one swift moment, the rope in her hand loosened. The enemy team member seized that chance. By the time Naruki's gaze returned to him, he was right beside her.

"What!"

"So naive, newcomer!"

"Ah!"

External Kei hit Naruki and sent her sliding out. She wanted to climb back up but her body was paralyzed. The commentator announced she was out of the match. Everyone thought the same conclusion would be made for Nina, but reality spoke differently.

"Huh!"

Dust clouded the place where Nina had landed. Soil particles fell onto the ground. A shadow flew out of the dust cloud.

Variation of internal Kei: Kongoukei.

Using all of her strength, Nina had used Layfon's skill to block Vance's attack. After blocking Vance, she had leapt over his head to defeat Naruki's enemy. She also defeated the other member of the 1st platoon.

The commentator couldn't make a conclusion to the fight, and more cheering and shouts roiled down from the audience stand.

".....It's not finished."

"You've become strong....." In response to Vance's fighting stance, Nina readied her own as she moved.

"Is it because of that guy's influence?"

"It's not my personality to rely on others," she declared.

"I see. So that guy's thinking. You're moving in a good direction. "

Vance meant Karian, the person who knew of Layfon's past. He switched Layfon from General Studies into Military Arts, and put him into Nina's team. The 17th platoon's real beginning was when Nina's determination aligned with Karian's thinking.

"I'm grateful to the Student President..... But what came after that was my own path."

"Not a bad response," Vance said. "I can fight you more..... though that's what I wanted to say." Regret filled his voice.

"It's the end."

A change occurred on the front line of the 1st platoon. Intense light burnt Nina's eyes, and the sound of explosions drowned the cheering of the crowd.

"This is!?" she said, forgetting Vance was in front of her.

"They've put in a flake mine in the ground.....We got tricked," Felli's guilty voice came through her flake.

Dalshena was free to choose her own timing for when to attack. When did she move.....? Seemed to be when the crowd cheered. If that was the case, then the target of the explosion was Dalshena..... ...

"..... They got through our opening when our vision was sealed."

Next was Felli, relaying how the 1st platoon defeated them.

Nina didn't think the flake mine would finish off Dalshena, but the number of flakes was large, and the light and the rumble of the explosion were unexpectedly overwhelming..... They couldn't do much under that situation.

"And I'm here to stop you while the others take out Sharnid and that guy's sister..... I was to play with you during that time."

Both Dalshena and Naruki were out of action. Only Nina was left. Felli had fighting power but she was one against so many Military Artists.

"It's your defeat, Nina Antalk."

I can still win!

Although that was Nina's thought, it failed to turn into strength to tightly grip the iron whips. Vance looked bigger than he was in front of her.

Regaining her sight, Dalshena's intense gaze pierced Nina. Nina moved her own gaze away.

Anger filled the Locker Room.

"!"

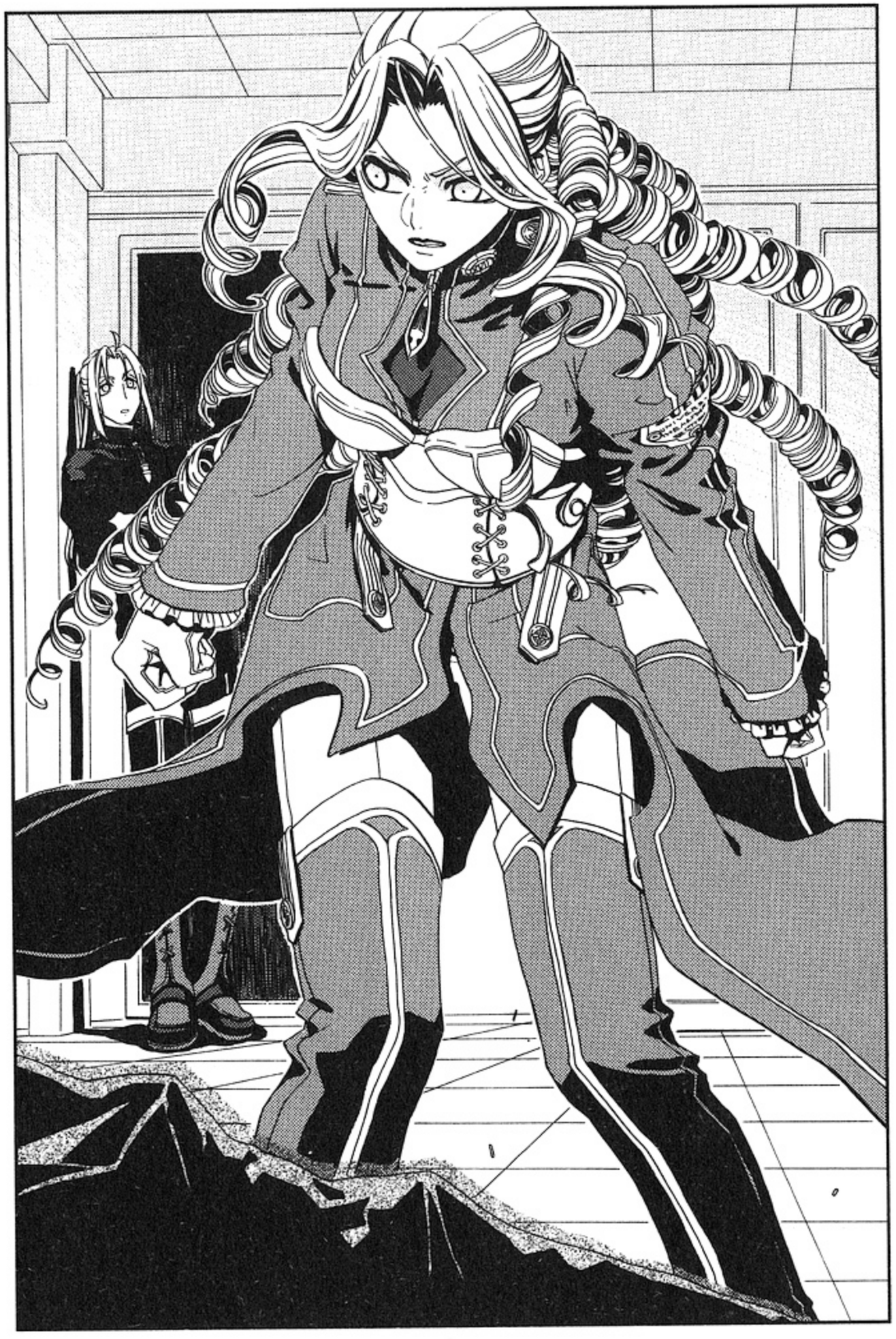
An invisible bomb waited to explode. What was shattered became the sound of reality. The cabinet leaning against the wall had been cut into two.

"Calm down, Shena," Sharnid said tiredly. He was hiding beside the door.

"......Calm down?" The person who cut down the cabinet..... Dalshena slowly turned around to glare at him.

"I.....This is my first time experiencing a match as terrible as this."

Her gaze swept across the room. She was too outraged to scream. The fight between Nina and Vance didn't happen in the end. The moment when Nina saw Vance's attack, she was defeated . Vance's words about sending people to find Sharnid was a trap. Numbed by Vance's air, Nina didn't hear the siren announcing the end of the match.



"Damn!" Dalshena destroyed another cabinet.

"That's enough."

"But.....!"

Sharnid frowned. "You neglected your surroundings because you were used to relying on others. This is no longer the same when you can just look at what's before you."

"!"

The muscles on Dalshena's face twitched. She opened her mouth and closed it, gritting her teeth.

"I....." That was all that slipped through her closed mouth, and she rushed out of the Locker Room.

The sound of the door closing echoed in the room.

"......Well, I think we did pretty well."

Sharnid's words felt like they were there to disperse the echo, rather than a comfort.

"......How so?" Nina asked. "It's true we had a terrible match."

"Well, even so. Vance won. He had accurately taken advantage of Shena's weakness. As for the flake mine, isn't that eye-opening, Felli-chan?"

Felli nodded with an expression stiffer than usual.

"..... The flakes buried there probably cut off the Psychokinesis communication. If they did do that, they couldn't read the flow of the other team's Psychokinesis. They then used a minimal level of Psychokinesis to trigger off the flake mine. This technique isn't necessary against filth monsters, but against humans, that's different. It's a technique we should learn."

He added, "Can't be like that the next time."

It seemed Felli felt regret too.

"I see.....well, it's that type of feeling. Layfon had taught Nina some skill, but it wasn't enough to change the result. We underestimated the 1st platoon. That was all."

"But.....!"

Nina couldn't accept this. Everything felt hopeless once she knew Layfon couldn't participate in the match. She couldn't forgive herself. She didn't want to admit that they couldn't do anything without Layfon. She wanted to win. She wanted to win just this time. To win a match that wasn't a "beautiful match." What should she say to Layfon at the hospital?

Sharnid and the rest of the 17th platoon couldn't find anything else to say to Nina.

Knock Knock.....

The cautious knocking on the door broke the silence. Nina didn't move. Sighing, Sharnid opened the door.

".....Mei?" Naruki said. She'd been sitting on the long bench in silence.

Meishen stood nervously at the door.

"Hi," Mifi waved, oblivious to the atmosphere.

Chapter 5: Two Fights

"......Are you going?" Meishen said, crying. The tram had gone past a few stations. No new passengers appeared. Meishen's crying voice mixed in with the sound of the tram moving, and it disappeared.

"Huh?"

"It's strange you were discharged right after the operation. Layton really is going?"

He didn't respond with words to confuse the topic. Would she believe him if he said "no"? She wouldn't believe him.

"......Yeah." So he nodded.

Meishen was looking at him with reddened eyes. Her mouth opened as if she wanted to say something, but she swallowed the words.

"Does it have to be Layton?"

"If it were another city, I think it wouldn't have to be me."

But Zuellni didn't have any experienced Military Artists. This was too heavy a burden for the students. When he fought the aged phase filth monster, he said they could defeat it with their heart prepared to lose half of the city. They probably could have defeated it. But at that time, the probability of the city becoming useless was high. The most important thing was that the city

would face a crisis.....not just the danger of filth monsters attacking, but the probability of the city's functions stopping, to the point that the city would not be able to support its occupants. Perhaps the crisis of the food shortage at Grendan would in turn come to Zuellni. Grendan managed that time, but could Zuellni manage it too? The ending was that they couldn't do anything but delay the time of death.

"It'll definitely be all right if I go.....Am I arrogant?"

".....A bit."

"I thought so."

In truth, "a bit" was an understatement. He had known that since long ago.

"I wasn't thinking of 'protecting' anything.....To seek a path outside Military Arts, I said that before right? I still feel the same now. If we win the Military Arts Competition this year, I plan to return to General Studies."

"Can that really happen?"

"The Student President who switched me to Military Arts would have graduated. I think it's possible."

"But....."

"I want to start from there."

He could guess what she wanted to say, so he didn't want to hear it.

"This place is the only place I have since leaving Grendan."

This was the only place where he obtained a scholarship. Because of his level of education and the little money he had, he could only come to Zuellni. So he was here now.

"It's different now. Mei's here. Naruki, Mifi, the Captain and everyone. That's why I want to do something."

Zuellni had to remain safe for that reason alone.

"That's why I'll do what I can do."

Meishen's words turned his gaze back to her. "".....I can't fight. But is there anything I can do for you?"

"....."

"Though you think you're doing this for yourself, you're doing it to protect us.....so I want to do something for you."

".....Thanks."

"Because.....Because.....I, I....." she looked at the floor, blushing.

"Then, I have a request."

"Huh?"

"This'll have to wait until after the match though. Can you deliver a message to the Captain?"

And Layfon relayed the message to Meishen. A short message.

"Is that ok?"

"Yes, the Captain will understand," he said decisively as he looked at her.

"You really do trust the Captain."

"Yeah." It'd be embarrassing to nod honestly, so he chose to smile, bitterly.

And as such, Meishen had come to the Locker Room. She saw the sign outside the place forbidding unrelated peoples' entry, but she ran into Mifi in the hall. Mifi talked to the senpai in charge of the place and he let them through.

"Mei.....Did anything happen?" Naruki asked.

Shocked into silence by the stiff atmosphere in the room, Meishen made up her mind and moved to stand before Nina.

"Ex, excuse me....."

"What?" Nina said with surprise. Surprised that it wasn't Naruki who came to her but Meishen. Nina's expression turned gentle.

Meishen stared at her. Nina Antalk. This wasn't the first time she saw her. They were together at the camp before, and they had attended the celebration too. Still, this felt like Meishen's first time meeting Nina.

(This is Nina Antalk.)

The person that Layfon trusted. She was a Military Artist but she wasn't as strong as Layfon. She also couldn't have a past as painful as Layfon's.....Meishen thought. Though she didn't know the reason, Layfon trusted the Captain.

"Uh..... Layfon asked me to tell you something."

"Tell me something?" Nina asked. "That is?"

"Please ask the Student President and go see Zuellni. This must be something that only the Captain can do."

"Zuellni?" Naruki asked instead. Everyone else held the same confusion.

"Isn't Zuellni here? What's happened?" Mifi asked.

"Don't know....." Meishen said.

"..... 'Get the explanation from the Student President', something like that?" Nina said, turning Meishen's gaze back to her, as if she had understood something while everyone else was wondering.

"Nina, you know something? Well, I don't get it, but the situation seems pretty clear." Sharnid said.

"Don't you know of it too?" Felli said coldly. Sharnid shrugged.

Harley had been checking the Dites, unperturbed by Dalshena destroying the room. But now, "I, I'm not involved this time!" he said in a fluster to show he was in the clear.

"Speaking of which.....Huh? Could that be it? Ah.....Kirik was in the lab today. Aah.....Can it be.....Uhhh, he's too sly!" Harley couldn't help but spill out his true feelings. Nina glared at him.

"That isn't the issue.....Really."

"Geez.....what a good natured person," Felli said and took out her Dite. "I'm sending the flakes over."

"Thanks. If possible, get in touch with Layfon first."

"He had an operation today. He shouldn't be too far. I'll make it. "

"Yes. Really."

"Then what do you plan to do?" Sharnid asked.

"Head for the place with clues. You guys, stay ready. I'll get back to you."

"Roger," Sharnid replied as Nina ran off. What were left were the restored Dites, Felli, and Sharnid. Sharnid pulled over the weapon harness to himself and laid down on the long bench..... Naruki, Mifi and Meishen didn't know what was going on.

"Hey.....What's going on?" Naruki asked Sharnid.

"That guy's at it again."

"Huh?"

".....Has he gone to fight?"

Naruki and Mifi watched Meishen in shock.

"Did he say that?"

".....Because he wants to protect, from now on."

Sharnid sighed. "Just like him. Geez, doing this kind of thing so calmly."

"Please... wait a minute," Naruki massaged her head. "What happened to Layfon? Fighting....."

"You'll know in a minute," he looked at Felli. As if they had planned it beforehand, Karian's voice came through Felli's flake.

"Ah, you already knew?" he said sourly.

"It's not 'already knew'!" Nina said in anger, running on the rooftop. After leaving the war field, she had confirmed the location of her destination and jumped onto a roof. If she ran on the ground using Kei, she'd confuse the students and face many obstructions. On the roofs, she could run as fast as she wanted.

"Why did you involve Layfon in such danger?"

"If possible, I want him to concentrate on Military Arts."

That sounded like Karian's true feelings.

"But not this time."

"Just what has happened?" she suppressed her anger at Karian for letting Layfon fight alone.

"The city's on a rampage."

"What?"

"As I said, the city's on a rampage."

It seemed Karian hadn't yet managed his own feelings about this situation. Impatience and anxiety ran in his voice. "It's like we're giving ourselves up to filth monsters.....Do you think I can simply tell everyone about it?"

True. It'd be chaos.

"But....."

"On the other hand.....I think I can tell from the last fight. We're still immature. We already fought so desperately against larvae. No, if Layfon wasn't there, we'd have turned into their food."

Nina bit her lips. Yes, Nina and the rest of them couldn't fight the filth monsters directly. The monster's shell was so hard that Nina couldn't break it. It took her several hits to kill the monster, but it'd be an easier fight if she could break the shell with one strike. After that, she contributed to the fight with the aged phase filth monster by offering Layfon a strategy, but could she herself carry that through..... Even if she could, who else could defeat a larva with just one strike? Who..... Did Zuellni have such a Military Artist? She couldn't think of anyone else. She didn't hear of anyone killing numerous larvae in the previous fight.

"Only he can solve this problem. That's the truth."

"Bu....."

She felt that Layfon was becoming more and more unreachable. She already knew the distance between them was too large. She was doing her best to catch up to him.....now it felt like she wasn't even permitted to catch up. Nina's feet moved as if they were trying to stop themselves.

"But....."

"He wanted you guys to go, and wanted you guys to make preparations first."

"Huh?"

"Ask him. So what do you want to do?" Karian asked.

Silence descended. Everyone could hear Karian's voice, but no one said anything. They all waited for Nina's reply.

"I'm not going."

"Oh....." Curiosity came through Karian's voice. "That isn't like you."

"I have something else to do."

Layfon had said that only Nina could do it. Go to Zuellni..... The Electronic Fairy of the city was also called Zuellni. Other people knew of that as a fact, but none of them had experienced that knowledge. That was the meaning behind Layfon's words.

Nina's feet moved again. He said he trusted her. Only she would think of doing something about the unusual actions of the Electronic Fairy. So she had to do something about it.

"Then what do we do? Do you need help?" Sharnid asked.

"Don't know, but.....I think he needs reinforcements. Go to Layfon."

"Roger.....We believe in you?"

"Of course."

It was strange for Sharnid to say that kind of thing.

"Though I don't know what you're planning.....Smooth sailing."

"As you like," Karian said.

Nina took a big leap. She jumped over several buildings and landed on the ground. This was her first time coming to the Mechanical Department during the day. She entered the place through the entrance reserved for staff.

The bike had only been in use for four hours before Layfon and the others arrived at their destination. This place was the closest in the arid wilderness. The place had sunk into a valley, and a number of huge bodies laid on the angled slope, half buried in the ground, stirring. Filth monsters.

"First and second phase....."

"Exactly~" Haia nodded at Layfon.

It seemed the mother had given birth to the larvae here. Since no cities were around, the mother must have become the larvae's food. Intense fights over her had taken place.

"Twelve of them," Fermaus' electronic voice reported.

"The same as the information we got before."

The beginning number must be about 100 or so. Most of them died in the growing stage from being unable to adapt to eating pollutants, and from fighting and consuming each other for survival. Only twelve filth monsters were left, and they showed signs of waking due to the close proximity of a city.

"If we had come any later, these guys would have headed straight for the city~" Haia waved his hand and the subordinates standing behind him spread out.

"Next.....Our contract is to defeat half of the filth monsters, so six of them."

"I know," Layfon nodded coldly and took out the Adamantium Dite and the Sapphire Dite. The sword handles could be combined as before. Kirik had told him the combination of the alloys.

Layfon had heard from Karian. The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang moved between cities on their roaming bus. They fought filth monsters in their travels. Karian was dealing with the Mercenary Gang because of the filth monsters, but Zuellni didn't have enough money to pay the amount that Haia had raised in the deal. An Academy City's main income derived from the data of research, new techniques, new inventions. Although it was a place of immature people, senior students had a certain level of knowledge in the research area. They researched and obtained new data for the city they were in, but their contribution was also

meaningful to other cities because Academy Cities profited by selling data to each other. However, Academy Cities didn't aim to make profits, so if a profit was made, that was used on students' living.

Zuellni's current financial situation could not afford Haia's price . Hence, Karian suggested a compromise. He named the amount he could pay, and Haia named the number of Mercenary Gang members to participate in the fight, and Haia then decided on how many monsters they could handle, leaving the rest for Zuellni to manage. And Zuellni's representative was Layfon.

"I'm giving you half. Hunt whatever way you like," Layfon said.

".....That's revolting," Haia said, displeased. Layfon's mind was already elsewhere and didn't hear him.

"Don't be like that. A Heaven's Blade successor is like that," Fermaus said. "Holding a Heaven's Blade means he isn't allowed to follow the level of anyone around him. He has to act alone even if he has comrades with him. That's a Heaven's Blade successor. Only other Heaven's Blades are allowed to stand beside him."

"Tsk. An end without cooperation. If I held the Heaven's Blade, it wouldn't be like that," Haia said as if he was spitting something.

Layfon put the rod-like Dites into the slots of his Dite, and ran his Kei through it.

"Restoration AD."

The Adamantium Dite increased in weight, its shape changing.

"That guy....." Layfon frowned at the restored Dite. Kirik said Layfon was stubborn, but he himself was the same. Layfon was indeed holding a sword. The blade was slightly curved but it still was a sword. The blade was sharper and more solid than the blade before, and it didn't hold the special quality of a Katana.

"Well, only that point is different. The shape is the same as before."

With this blade, he could easily slice open a filth monster's hard shell.

"Next....."

Time to go? His mind flew back to earlier.

(Mei, can she do it?)

He didn't think she'd ignore his request. It was difficult to enter the Locker Room during a match. If she could get them out of the Locker Room smoothly.....

"Hey, wait a bit more. They're softer when they're awake~"

A filth monster's shell became much denser and harder during the monster's dormant period. A hard shell would hinder a filth monster's movement, so the shell tended to soften up when the monster was awake. Another saying went that the shell was harder in the filth monster's sleep to prevent other filth monsters from eating it. Was it really true.....

The filth monsters stirred, half buried in the ground. They should have felt Zuellni's closeness. Perhaps the shells really were softening to allow greater flexibility.

"......It's all right if I just clean up my part."

"Ugh. Allow me to show you the beautiful cooperation of my team. You just shut up and see," Haia said, bending down from the rock he was on.

Layfon originally intended to ignore him, but.....

[Please wait a moment more.] Fermaus' voice stopped his feet from moving. He glanced at Haia. It appeared he hadn't heard Fermaus.

[I'm only speaking to you.]

"Why?" Layfon asked in a low voice.

[Haia's interested in you. Ryuhou always mentioned you. He was happy that you were given a Heaven's Blade, as if you were his own apprentice.]

An electronic voice that should be devoid of any feelings, but Layfon felt nostalgia in that voice.

"You....."

[I knew Ryuhou since I was little. Well, he was older than me. I had also met Derek.....Don't know whether he could recognize me with my looks as they are now.]

Layfon recalled Fermaus' face without the mask.

[I wanted to meet you, but I gave up. We didn't intend to return to Grendan soon. I never guessed we'd meet this way.]

".....What does the Queen want with the Haikizoku?"

Since he couldn't ask Haia, he turned the question to Fermaus. This current situation was due to the Haikizoku. Best if it disappeared. However, he wouldn't feel any more relaxed if the Haikizoku was taken to Grendan because Leerin and Derek were there.

[What she wants.....I want to know too. The Salinvan Guidance Mercenary Gang was formed to find the Haikizoku. Our mission remains the same even if our leader changes. This is a secret among the royalty.]

"So the Mercenary Gang has been following that order and seeking the Haikizoku?"

[Well.....It felt like a heavy mission in the first stage of the Mercenary Gang, but the feeling has become less urgent in Ryuhou's generation. Besides, Ryuhou didn't join the Mercenary Gang for that reason.]

"Huh?"

[Ryuhou just wanted to travel.]

Layfon failed to reply to that unexpected answer.

[He always sighed that because of him, Derek wasn't able to leave.....He was really happy when he heard Derek's apprentice had become a Heaven's Blade successor.]

"....."

But that apprentice did something to taint the name of Psyharden.

[That's why Haia hates you.]

"Why?"

The thought of himself tainting Psyharden flashed in his head.

[No, that's not it.] Fermaus denied as if he had predicted Layfon's thinking. He might have read Layfon's expression with Psychokinesis.

[Haia wasn't born in Grendan. He was an orphan and Ryuhou picked him up. Haia was very full of himself, but he fell under Ryuhou's influence. He and Ryuhou had developed a father and son relationship. No one wants to see his own parent praising another child, right?]

"I don't get it."

Layfon was also an orphan, so he didn't understand the feeling between a father and his son. But he understood it wasn't anything funny when Derek praised other apprentices.

[Haia wants to take the Haikizoku back to Grendan so he can take the Heaven's Blade. He wants to prove whatever Derek's apprentice can achieve, Ryuhou's apprentice can do it as well.]

Fermaus laughed. It felt strange and itchy to hear that electronic laughter.

A feeling between family members? No.....How should he put it.....Layfon held his hand, confused by his own feelings. Another voice suddenly cut in.

[What're you doing?]

Felli's voice was icy. But it was comforting to him as he was used to it.

"Felli.....Senpai," Remembering that Fermaus was still listening, he hurriedly added 'senpai'.

[It'll take a while for my flake to arrive so I'm borrowing this flake.] Dissatisfaction filled her voice.

[Incredible.] The electronic voice sounded. The flake beside Layfon held Psychokinesis from two different people.

[You didn't cut off my Psychokinesis but merged yours with mine? Brilliant. I can interfere with another's use of Psychokinesis, but I've never heard of using it this way.]

[Sorry, but.....] Felli's voice was lighter than usual when she responded to Fermaus' excitement. [I've something to say to this hopeless idiot. Unrelated people please leave.]

[Ah.....]

Fermaus didn't say anything else. It appeared Felli had completely taken over the flake. Though she wasn't physically here , it felt like she and Layfon were alone, together. The discordant and tense atmosphere descended on him. That was Felli's anger.

"Uh.....I'm sorry."

[Never mind. I understand.....I'm deeply shocked by Zuellni's level.]

"That's not it," he shook his head, relieved that she understood him. "This is an Academy City. It must be common."

[.....How troublesome.] She then told him of what happened with the 17th platoon. [Then why did you call us over?]

Why did he call them over when their strength wasn't enough to fight filth monsters?

"To watch."

[Watch?]

"The fight. My style of fighting isn't useful, but the Mercenary Gang's is. Felli, I'd be happy if you recorded as much as you can."

Young Military Artists at Grendan would watch the fights of veterans. They'd fight after feeling the atmosphere of the fight and the horror of filth monsters. They'd prepare themselves mentally for the fight, and figure out their own styles. This was a habit only seen in Grendan because of Grendan's numerous contacts with filth monsters.

[It'll be difficult to turn the images in my head into video images.....I can record the images from the helmet though.]

"Please. If only Sharnid senpai and everyone else saw it, Captain would get angry....."

[Please don't say something that'd make me not want to prepare for this.]

"Huh?"

[A joke. Then I'll relay this to them.]

"Yes, please tell them where to wait and watch. How long until you get here?"

[I can start recording when I see the battle. When my flake arrives, it can record the entire fight.]

Layfon nodded. "Then I'm counting on you."

[Let this flake be your aid.]

The vision dimmed in Layfon's helmet and immediately turned into a colorful world.

"This really is better."

[.....I won't forgive you even if you praise me. And please don't force yourself.]

"I know."

Felli didn't say anything. She must be relaying the message to Sharnid.

"Next....."

His preparation was done.

(Next is to trust the Captain in that.)

He worried about the Captain more than his impending fight. While he was thinking of this, the situation over at Zuellni came through. Felli deliberately left it out of her report to Layfon.

Nina descended into the center of the Mechanical Department on

the lift that was fenced waist-high. As the lift stopped, she ran out of it. The time was dusk, and there were no other cleaners around. Almost all of the workers here were in the Resting Room. Nina ran without worrying about knocking over people. No one else was around.

Zuellni was on a rampage. She couldn't believe it. That young girl on a rampage? But it was true that the city was heading straight for filth monsters when it should be avoiding them. Layfon was now fighting because of that.

(Damn, just what's happened?)

She was running now because of that reality. Nina didn't have to doubt.

(A child that gentle.....)

She and Zuellni met for the first time when she started working at the Mechanical Department. She didn't' know Zuellni as long as she knew Harley, but Zuellni was her first friend since entering the Academy City. Zuellni was important to her, and this had nothing to do with the amount of time they had spent together.

"Something bad has happened."

She didn't think Zuellni would want to be like this. She stopped, a figure floating up in her mind. Thick metallic plates stood before her. A small hill piled with a number of metal plates..... The center.

"Zuellni!" Nina could only call as she walked around the hill. She didn't see an entrance into the hill.

"Zuellni!"

The sound of mechanisms working drowned out her voice. A feeling of something suppressive rushed up her chest. Her heartbeat quickened. Was she tense? Excited. She put a hand on her chest, realizing the emotions inside her.

"......What is this."

Unrelated to her consciousness and the situation, her body was becoming excited. Her consciousness and her body seemed to go in different directions. Her body temperature rose as if blood was draining from her head.

"Uh....." Her legs weakened and she put a hand on the metal plate. And then.....

"What?"

The support beneath her hand folded inward. Nina fell, reacted instinctively, and rolled on the fallen plate. The plate lay on an angle and Nina slid down on it. Her shoulder hit the floor and stopped her movement. The slide wasn't a long one.

"This is.....the inside." Nina never thought she'd enter the hill this way. She stood up and confirmed her surroundings. She thought she was in total darkness when she rolled down the plate, but it wasn't entirely dark in here. Dim light pulsated in the

middle of the small space. Gold and green light flowed, slowly chasing away the darkness. The light made Nina dizzy. Her heart still beating fast. She felt uncomfortable.

"Is it here....."

Without waiting for Kei to help her body recover, she took a step in the direction of the light. Nina walked around the light and discovered the space wasn't as big as she thought. The face exuding the light greeted her.

"Zuellni!"

A gem sat on an enormous pedestal cut out by machinery. The base of the pedestal was about the height of Nina's waist. It was wide enough for four to five people to surround it with hand touching hand. The gem on the pedestal was in its raw uncut form. Several tubes extended from the base of the pedestal. Calcite stuck on the gem here and there, transparent like the surface of calm water. Zuellni was in there. But Nina wasn't sure whether it really was Zuellni.

"......What is this?"

Nina's voice trembled.

Zuellni's pupils had lost their focus. Nina didn't know what was inside the gem, but she saw the girl form of Zuellni floating, as if her hands and feet were stretching out. As if she was dead. A chill ran down Nina's back.

"Why is it here?"

A huge creature with golden hair and branching horns stood behind Zuellni inside the gem. A male goat. The Haikizoku.

"You.....Why are you here!?" Nina shouted and snatched out her Dite. She restored it, and urged by outrage and dizziness, she used her Kei. Her iron whips struck the gem, giving off a crisp sound. Green and golden light weaved together like a heart beating. They swayed and instantly vanished into normality.

"Fu!" Rebounded into the air, she did a backflip and landed. She continued to strike the gem but failed to do any damage to it. No.....

(Something pushes me away before I strike the gem.)

That was what she felt.

(Then.....? Damn.)

Felli's flake should be in here. Nina could ask her to analyze the gem. Maybe Felli was already running an analysis.

But she didn't ask the Psychokinesist on her team. She suppressed her instinctive urge to call Felli by breathing in deeply.

(Isn't Layfon also alone?) She thought.

Outrage caused her to briefly forget herself. The dissatisfaction she had up till now was gone. She didn't attack the gem again.

(This might affect Zuellni.)

This was the center of the Mechanical Department. If she destroyed it, the city might cease functioning. Outrage made her forget herself, and she realized that in that instant, she might have ended up damaging the city itself. Horror filled her. But what should she do.....

"My....."

"....."

A voice filled her head. Her body turned stiff.

"My body is already rotten. It is useless. Driven by the madness of hatred, I turned into flame. I now seek a new master for a new purpose. You whom I hope for, obey my wish. Possess my spirit and show my value. As such, I'll turn the Ashes of Ignasis into a sword, and eliminate all your enemies."

Layfon had heard of these words from the Haikizoku in the ruined city. Now these words were directed to Nina for the first time.

"You.....You can speak? The Ashes of Ignasis? What're you saying?"

She didn't understand the Haikizoku's words, but she quickly chased away that puzzle. She understood some of it because of what happened in the match with the 10th platoon.

"You, you're looking for someone so you can fight filth monsters? Is that why you're doing this to Zuellni?"

"In order to obtain the person who can hold my spirit, I now take action."

"What.....?"

"The situation will help a person change and grow," it said curtly and fell silent.

(To change and grow.....)

Nina was only puzzled for a while, then realization flooded through her.

"Could.....Could you be making us fight filth monsters!?"

People could become strong by being forced into fights. They couldn't survive if they weren't strong. Electronic Fairies protected their city and their people. If the Electronic Fairy was taken away..... And if the city itself headed for filth monsters.....Then people had to continuously fight filth monsters to survive.

"Ridiculous.....The city will die."

A city would face constant danger of annihilation if it continued to fight filth monsters. That was why Regios moved to avoid filth monsters.

"If a person can possess me, then many more people will be saved by the Ashes of Ignasis."

"That is.....That isn't a logical theory," Nina groaned. How could it say that destroying Zuellni was all right for the sake of finding a new master? It had possessed Dinn before.

"I won't let you do what you want here.....Let Zuellni go!"

The sight of Zuellni's dead posture increased the impatience and worry in her.

"My determination is infinite."

The Haikizoku stirred within the gem.

"But you possess a strange feeling."

"Wh, what.....?"

"You who thinks of protecting the city, come and try. Even though you do not have the will to feed me, I'll bet on that feeling of yours."

"Wh....."

Though she didn't understand what the Haikizoku meant, she felt the danger and readied her stance to defend herself. But it was meaningless. The Haikizoku vanished the next second when her iron whips blocked her line of sight to the gem. And quickly.....

"What, Ah....."

She felt something filling her chest.....

"Can, can this be....."

It was forcing itself into her. The hole she didn't know she had in her chest was being stuffed full. Her consciousness started to fade as she felt herself drowning.

(Can this be.....)

Was this what Dinn felt.....?

"St, stop it!"

Only Felli heard Nina's scream. She didn't know what happened next as her Psychokinesis couldn't reach it. Felli

conveyed the event to Karian so he could send people over to the Mechanical Department. She didn't tell Layfon about it.

"Next....." Haia stood up on the huge rock. The filth monsters had awakened from their dormant stage, spreading their wings.

"About time to go," he murmured as the other Mercenary Gang members increased their Kei without exciting the filth monsters.

"How's it over there?" Layfon asked Felli.

[The preparation is completed.]

"You don't have to record me.....Actually, better if you don't record it."

[I know. Even if I want to, it's not possible to make you a target.]

Felli's words were as unforgiving as ever. He smiled bitterly as he confirmed the movements of the filth monsters. The filth monsters should have already discovered him and the others by smell. Will they take the bait here or fly straight for the more plentiful Zuellni.....

"Then please watch."

[Don't force yourself.] That was Sharnid's voice.

Layfon spoke to Haia. "We have to time our fights. It'll be troublesome if even one filth monster heads for Zuellni."

"Who're you talking to?" Excitement showed through Haia's voice. He laughed. "We're hunting dogs on a battlefield. Don't take us for little dogs that need to be taught how to take a bite."

"I can tell you how to fight," Layfon shouldered the huge sword in his hand. Haia took the same posture with his Katana.

"I'll reap them all."

And External Kei burst out of Layfon. The Kei shattered the ground before him as it swept up the dust and swallowed the filth monsters.

"Time for the hunt!" Haia roared and ran out, moving at high speed with his body close to the ground.

"Restoration 02."

Layfon's Sapphire Dite became steel threads. Looking at the filth monster that first flew out of the dust cloud, he used Whirl Kei – a variation of Internal Kei. The rock underneath him broke into pieces as he jumped. The filth monster's body curved like a snake, its wings beating in repeated motions to lift the filth monster into the sky. Layfon's sword chopped into its exposed chin.

The hard shell cracked easily. The power of the Whirl Kei remained steady. He leaned his body onto the sword, and using his own weight pushed the sword through, cutting through the filth monster's body. The enemy collapsed and fell. Layfon landed, his momentum carrying him across the ground. The dust surrounding him did not hinder his vision since he had Felli's support. He slid to a stop and turned around to feel his surroundings with the steel threads. He still had five filth monsters to defeat. He confirmed that all five were caught in his steel threads, then he let go of the Sapphire Dite.

The handle of the Sapphire Dite was immediately lifted into the air. It stopped in midair, then shook violently. External Kei assaulted the newly awakened filth monsters. The enemies struggled, pulling the threads this way and that. None of the five filth monsters managed to get an advantage, and their respective struggles kept the handle in balance. The filth monsters in turn lost their own balance and fell back onto the ground.

"Next.....!" As Layfon was about to let loose the Internal Kei building up inside him, he kneeled down at the sudden pain on his back.

[Fon Fon!]

Embarrassed at being called by this name, Layfon felt like laughing.

"Don't worry. The wound on my back's just opened a bit."

[That's not a bit.]

"A bit. It hurts, but my protective suit is still intact."

A battle with a time limit was better than a damaged protective suit.

Knee still bent, he shot into the air with a burst of Internal Kei. He landed on a filth monster that had flown out of the dust cloud.

"You can't stop here. It's your death when you stop."

Now that he stood here, Layfon had no time to worry about his own body.

One swing of his sword chopped off the head of the filth monster. The sword's sharpness was unquestionable. It wouldn't overheat so easily like last time and the cutting path was accurate. Layfon wasn't at his best body condition, but he felt energized. Standing on the dead filth monster, he lifted his head to gaze at the sky. The sky always seemed rusty-red to him when he fought filth monsters. The pollutant density was higher than usual. Perhaps there was some truth in Fermaus' words.

"I feel good.....Today, I can even cut open the sky."

[Forget that and hurry up with finishing the rest!] Felli scolded. He smiled bitterly.

"Got it."

He leapt from the descending head of the filth monster and saw his next opponent. This filth monster had just finished biting his sibling's head into pieces. It turned around. Head pointed to the ground and toes to the sky, Layfon leaned the tip of his sword on

the steel thread to stop himself from falling. One end of the threads sustained the tension of the filth monsters' struggle. His sword slid on the taut thread towards the Sapphire Dite. He grabbed hold of the handle of his blue Dite.....

"Tsk!"

He lost his balance. The Kei he had put earlier into the steel threads had been exhausted. The filth monsters recovered their freedom one by one. They pulled Layfon towards them. Using that momentum, he turned the Sapphire Dite back into its Dite form, took down two handles from it and put them back into his weapon harness.

"Restoration 01."

Layfon held the Sapphire Dite in his left hand as the steel threads vanished. He was flying towards two filth monsters that were turning around and heading in his direction. He calmly took out the two Dites placed in the slots of the Adamantium Dite and placed another Dite into one of the slots.

"Restoration AD."

He restored it again. The blade stretched into a length as long as Layfon was tall. The tip of the blade was in the shape of a crescent moon. A weapon that was like a halberd. The end of the handle was attached to the Sapphire Dite.

External Burst Type Kei – Gajiya.

The halberd drew a circle as if drawing Layfon in too, and it met the filth monster's long chin on the path of the circular movement, cutting away its obstacle. This was the Heaven's Blade successor Cauntia's technique. Having passed the filth monster, Layfon increased his speed as he spun around, widening the halberd's range and cutting down a part of the filth monster's body . Lastly, he took down the enemy's wing and prevented it from flying. Layfon used the momentum of his external Kei to rebound down towards the ground, chasing after the two other filth monsters. He took down the Sapphire Dite from the handle of the Adamantium Dite.

He attacked the uninjured filth monster.

External burst type variation – Bakushikou.

When the sword was about to stab deep into the body of the filth monster, the tip of the blade caused an explosion and blew a huge hole in the filth monster's abdomen. Layfon leaped through that hole and changed the Adamantium Dite into the huge sword. He also changed the Sapphire Dite into steel threads and spread the threads around.

Two more filth monsters left. One of them was already waiting for him with gigantic teeth. In the chin behind the huge teeth was a hole where smaller teeth sat next to one another without gaps in between them. The filth monster ate by pulling its prey into its mouth with the lower jaw, sucking it in, and grinding it down with the smaller teeth before swallowing. Floating in midair. Layfon ignored the theory of strong and weak and descended. His steel threads connected him to the ground. Another filth monster's long

body flew above his head. Its legs, hidden in hard shells, stretched down to grab him, but they were either cut down by or bounced off Layfon's blade. Layfon's steel threads wrapped around the filth monster above him as he once again stood on a steel thread in midair.

The other filth monster headed for him with its mouth opened wide. Saliva dripped from its mouth. He took out two Dites from his sword. The steel thread pulled taut as the filth monster above him struggled to break free. He leaped off the steel thread and swung with the Adamantium Dite.

External Burst type Kei – Sendan.

A massive amount of condensed external Kei shot out of the sword. The filth monster received it head on with its mouth opened. The external Kei cut the enemy in half. The internal organs of the filth monster fell in a circle with Layfon in the middle . Suddenly, the steel thread anchored in the ground was pulled loose, sending him flying past the filth monster that was originally above him. He grabbed the handle of the Sapphire Dite to prevent it from falling, and flipped around to face the final filth monster that was now beneath him. He put a Dite into the slot in the Adamantium Dite. This time he cut his enemy in half at a horizontal angle. The abdomen he stood on landed first. Layfon jumped away from the abdomen, to keep away from getting caught in its landing. He used the weight of the Adamantium Dite to cushion his own landing. The upper half of the severed filth monster's body kept moving forward but it slowly descended as the wings lost their speed.

Layfon took a deep breath to calm the Internal Kei roiling inside him. He had defeated all six filth monsters. He didn't release all his Kei, since the battle hadn't finished. The Dites also remained in their restored forms.

"Thanks for the good work," Felli said through the flake.

"No matter how many times I see you, you're still incredible," Sharnid said. It seemed Felli had opened up a communication channel between them.

"It's still unbelievable even though I just saw it," Naruki said.

"......Is this a dream?"

That was Dalshena's voice. Though Layfon heard Sharnid had invited her to join the team for the inter-platoon match, he didn't think she'd come here.

"No.....Forget about me. Please look at the other fight."

Feeling slightly shy, Layfon turned his gaze to the remaining fight.

Leading the Mercenary Gang, Haia was fighting with his all. Their fight was a product of cooperation. The Mercenary Gang members acted as bait to draw the filth monsters into separate fights, preventing them from leaving and flying for Zuellni. Haia was fighting against one of the filth monsters on his own. His Dite had been repaired, maintaining its original Katana form. Enveloped in Kei, the blade lashed out at the filth monster's shell

without holding back. The amount of Kei was smaller than Layfon's, so he needed to strike several times to break that shell.

"Beautiful," Sharnid said. "I quite understand what you want us to see."

"But, that....." Dalshena said. Layfon knew what she didn't get to say.

"It's not impossible to aim for my level, but do you think the current students can manage it?" Layfon asked.

"Uh....." Dalshena couldn't respond.

"The way these Military Artists fight is how to fight filth monsters. This is the correct method. Mine is being a moron without any strategies."

He looked at Haia's fight. Haia's skill was similar to his. Layfon won in the fight against him because of a small difference. He didn't think the probability of a victory against Haia would increase exponentially if he held a Katana. That was what it meant to fight Haia who had learned all the Psyharden techniques. Could he become a Heaven's Blade successor.....? From Layfon's viewpoint, Haia had no problem except for his lack of Kei. If he had wanted, he could have fought against all six filth monsters alone. But he didn't do that. His probability of death was drastically reduced through the support of other members.

"In my fight, one wrong step means death. I could die from every single mistake I make. I don't have anyone to cover for those mistakes of mine....."

In fact, his mistake in the previous fight against the aged phase monster had damaged his Dite and left him in grave danger. Who knew what would have happened had Nina not shown up.

Felli and the others kept silent.

"I want you to see this. Results won't be immediate. But we can try again and again. I hope to fight together."

Nina told him how they felt when he was acting recklessly. What he did would worry them. If they helped him, his probability of death would be reduced, wouldn't it?

"You just said something very heavy," Sharnid broke the silence.

"Sorry."

".....But it doesn't feel bad to have you depend on us."

"Same here, if I can become your strength."

"Of course," Layfon nodded at Naruki's reply.

"Shena, this is the 17th platoon."

"Uh?"

"Not bad, right?"

"Humph."

Layfon couldn't tell what expression Dalshena held, but he could discern Sharnid trying to suppress his laughter.

Sharnid's attitude turned relaxed. "Nina'll definitely agree to another camp if we say it this way. This way, we can finish what we failed to accomplish in the last camp."

"Huh?"

"Moron. Still don't get it? The bath. The bath. It's naked girls playing in water and having something unexpected happen..... then us seeing it!"

"Wh.....!"

Naruki's voice. Layfon felt as if Felli's level of Psychokinesis had dropped.

".....I think you should start your life over. From before zero. "

".....I knew you were an idiot, but I didn't know it was to this level."

Layfon heard the sound of a Dite being restored on the other side of the flake.

"No, hey, hey, hey. Wait up. I was joking. Joking. Besides, Layfon was involved too."

"Don't get me caught up in it."

A swift moment of concentrated murderous intent. Layfon pretended he didn't sense it. In truth, he didn't remember participating in such a scheme.

"Hey, hey, don't be so cold. On the first night of camp, didn't we convey our determination by exchanging a glance?"

"No. That didn't happen," he said.

"You're so cold," Sharnid sighed.

"Don't involve others in your foolishness!" Dalshena shouted. Sharnid groaned.

Layfon pretended he didn't hear and turned the Dite back into its unrestored form. The fights of the Mercenary Gang had finished . Haia and his members prepared to return to Zuellni. Layfon headed for his bike.

(What would the captain think?) He suddenly thought. He had a feeling of being abandoned when Nina said she didn't plan to forfeit the match. It was like he wasn't needed in the 17th platoon. But he knew Nina wouldn't think like that. That was his trust in her. He only felt lonely.

He was the one who wanted them to become strong, so he was ashamed of himself for feeling lonely. Hence he wanted Nina and the rest of the team to see this battle. Help them become strong. They must see the battle for themselves.

(No, probably not.) Layfon shook his head, rejecting the probability of himself wanting to stand out. (I just want to fit in.)

So he let them see his fight, the fight that showed how Grendan fought, and the battle of the Mercenary Gang.

"Anyway, let's return."

Back to Zuellni where Nina, Felli, Meishen and the others waited.

He wanted them to see him more clearly.....Layfon mounted his bike.

Epilogue

The sound of wind blowing out of the air purification system and the sound of the vehicle swaying along with the city's movement..... This was Leerin's second time hearing it.

"Do you really have to go?"

She seemed to have heard similar words before. The pretentious teary eyes before. Leerin wasn't angry, but she felt that strength had been drained from her limbs.

"What're you doing?" she groaned, putting down the luggage beside her and pressing a hand on her forehead. Thinking back to how she was like that in the past, she thought she'd die from embarrassment.

Synola stopped pretending and put her chest out. "Excuse me. I'm sad because you're leaving."

Leerin was at the station of the roaming bus. Once she made her decision, she had acted swiftly. She had applied for temporary leave from school, and had then gone to pack her luggage and fill in the paperwork for a space on the roaming bus to Zuellni. She spent her last night with Derek. Her adopted father didn't even escort her to the front of the door. That was what he was like.

Who would have thought that Synola would be here.

"Why are you here?"

"Well, is it not good to see my cute younger friend leave?"

"It's good, but....."

She told Synola about her decision yesterday, then was dragged to the pub they visited before. Synola pulled in random patrons of the pub for a parting party. Leerin had thought she would leave it at that.

"Well, have a good trip. I won't urge you to hurry back, but please come back in spirit."

"......Yes," Leerin smiled with a gentle gaze.

"Ah, but I still hope for you to return sooner. I can't calm down without touching Lee-chan's breasts."

"I don't know about that."

"........Come back before the symptoms of withdrawal show up." She put her thumb in her mouth like a kid.

"I'll try to return later," Leerin massaged the side of her head.

The whistle sounded loudly, cutting through the noise of the crowd.

"I'm leaving."

"Ok, have a good trip," Synola waved as if Leerin wasn't going somewhere faraway.

(I can't think of it that way like her.)

She recalled the time when she saw Layfon off. She thought she wouldn't see him again. Probably not? The feeling with Synola was different, but Leerin couldn't compare it with another. She waved at Synola one more time at the entrance of the bus, and entered the bus.

"Uh.....Here."

She looked at the seat. For a person who would spend a long time in the seat, the space given was roomy. It was big enough for her to sleep in it. The luggage space was above the seat.

"Let me do it."

Someone took hold of her luggage.

"Ah, thank....."

Thank you very much. That was what Leerin wanted to say, but when she turned around to look at the person's face, her cheek twitched.

"Just that much luggage? So little for a girl."

Speaking flippantly as if his opinion applied to everyone. A handsome young adult. Laughter shone in his eyes as he looked at her.

"Savaris.....sama?"

"Shh, if possible, I hope you don't call me by my name."

"Wh, Why are you here.....?"

"Uh, I've got a secret mission so I have to travel to another city. What about you?"

"Huh? Uh....."

"Never mind. This will be a long journey. Let us spend the time happily."

Was it good to tell him she was going to meet with Layfon..... While she worried over it, Savaris had already lost his interest in the question he raised. The bus driver announced the bus was about to depart from the city.

A Heaven's Blade successor in the bus.....That should guarantee the safety of the trip, but for some reason, Leerin felt uneasy.

"Ah~ Leaving the city is just the first part of the trip. I'm really anticipating the rest of it~" Savaris said happily to himself.

Leerin sighed.

She ran along the edge of the city to chase the roaming bus. She finally reached the limit of the city. Synola stopped running and put her hands on her hips as she watched the roaming bus

disappear in the horizon. An average person would have confused the bus with its surrounding scenery, but not Synola.....or Alsheyra Almonise, the Queen of the Heaven's Blade successors.

"What would happen next?"

Alsheyra wasn't worried about Savaris. It was useless to worry about him. If he died in the middle of the journey, then let him die. Luck was required for what Alsheyra wanted. If Savaris came back dead, then luck wasn't on her side. She couldn't do anything to gather twelve Military Artists with exceptional abilities to become Heaven's Blade successors. Luck was needed. Besides, the birth of someone like Alsheyra was in itself luck.

"Hey, what do you think?"

Her gaze left the bus and moved to her own feet.

"What.....next?"

The reposing figure of a beast had appeared at some time. It wasn't your average tamed type of beast. Long fur wrapped around the body similar to a dog's. The front of its paws resembled human fingers. That beast answered her.

"What do you think, Grendan? Think your kind will come?"

"If they come, they'll only be destroyed and hunted, like I was," Grendan's voice was cold.

"That was a long time ago."

Grendan rested its chin on the ground.

"Well, I don't know what'll happen, but it'll be fine as long as Lee-chan's safe."

The laughter came from Grendan's nostrils. As if looking at the direction where the roaming bus had merged into the horizon, it spoke, "......A nightingale is singing."

"Huh?" Alsheyra turned around at the unfamiliar name.

Grendan opened its mouth, yawned, and fell silent.